
STAR
WARS
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STAR WARS™

Galaxy of Fear

Volume One

John Whitman



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Galaxy of Fear: The City of the Dead
Galaxy of Fear: Planet Plague
Galaxy of Fear: The Nightmare Machine
Galaxy of Fear: Ghost of the Jedi
Galaxy of Fear: Army of Terror
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Includes

Galaxy of Fear

Books One Through Six

STAR WARS Timeline



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25,793 *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*

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5,000 *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*

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Crimson Empire

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For my wife, Lisa, who always rescues me.

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Book One
Eaten Alive

Prologue

The security door slid open with a hiss. A dark figure stepped into the laboratory, where a single scientist stood over an examination table. On the table, something was still alive.

As the dark figure approached, the scientist did not turn around. Only two other beings in the entire galaxy had access to his hidden fortress, and he knew who had come to see him.

"Welcome, Lord Vader," the scientist said.

The figure covered in black armor took a step closer. His face was hidden behind a black, skull-like breath mask. He was Darth Vader, Dark Lord of the Sith the cruel right hand of the Emperor of the galaxy. "Have you completed your research?"

The scientist turned. In his hands he held a sharp, hooked instrument.

Behind him, the creature on the table shuddered, then grew still.

"Very nearly. The first five stages of my experiment are under way. Soon I will be able to complete the sixth and final stage. Then I shall provide the Emperor with the greatest power in the galaxy."

"That claim has been made before," Vader said. "The Death Star was supposed to be the ultimate mechanical terror. It

destroyed the planet Alderaan, but then the Rebels destroyed the Death Star."

"Pah!" the scientist replied. "That battle station was a toy. My designs are not machines... I control the power of life itself. I will create the ultimate weapon for the Emperor."

"The ultimate weapon," Vader cautioned, "is the Force."

"Of course, of course."

Vader stared at the scientist for a moment, his breath rasping through his mask like a threatening hiss. "You are running out of time. Already your work may have been discovered."

The scientist scowled. "You mean by *him*? Don't worry about him. I will deal with *him* when the time comes."

Vader raised one hand in caution. "If this secret should leak as did the secrets of the Death Star, the Emperor and I will be most displeased."

Then the Dark Lord turned away.

The scientist stared after the armored figure, his eyes burning a hole into Vader's back. Soon, he thought, very soon, he would have the power to destroy even Darth Vader. Then he would take his place at the Emperor's side.

He turned back to his experiments. He lowered his hooked blade. On the table, the creature screamed....

Chapter One

The attack came without warning.

In a small quadrant of space, an X-wing starfighter altered its flight path slightly to avoid the massive red moon looming ahead. As it did, a twin-ion engine ship, or TIE fighter, appeared in the moon's shadow, its two solar panels glinting with reflected light. Streaking through the void, the TIE opened fire, its dual turbo-lasers spitting out streaks of flame.

One of those laser shots creased the X-wing's hull. The X-wing's shields deflected most of the blast, and the shaken fighter banked away and accelerated to attack speed.

Relentlessly the TIE fighter followed. Not only was the TIE fast and maneuverable, but the pilot had an added advantage. She knew her opponent. She eyed him coldly as he twisted and turned in an effort to shake off his pursuer. But she stuck with him, sparing only quick glances at her tactical display, waiting for her target to fall into her sights.

She grinned. "You are mine."

The fleeing X-wing made a sharp course adjustment and headed straight for the small red moon. That pilot knew who was behind him. It was the same enemy he had faced a hundred times. She was good. If he was going to survive, he would have to be better.

"Try this," he challenged.

The X-wing pilot aimed the nose of his ship at the moon. Instantly the moon's gravity grabbed hold of him, and his speed increased. At the last possible moment, the pilot veered away. Keeping just within gravity's reach, the X-wing pilot gunned his engines and scraped along the moon's atmosphere. The belly of his ship left a trail of flames in the air as the tiny ship looped around the moon.

The effect was like a slingshot. Pulled forward by gravity, the X-wing hurtled around the moon's perimeter, far ahead of the pursuing TIE fighter. He came around the far side with his own lasers firing.

But the TIE pilot was ready for him. "Oldest trick in the manual!" she gloated. She had changed her course to intercept her quarry before he completed his backdoor maneuver, blasting the X-wing with laser fire. The X-wing jerked hard left in a desperate roll. Laser bolts exploded around his ship, but amazingly, not a single shot hit him. Laughing, the X-wing pilot scooted past the TIE fighter, then curled around to continue the dogfight.

"You are so lucky," the TIE pilot snapped.

Suddenly a metallic hand as large as the red moon descended from the heavens to block the X-wing's path. But the starfighter passed right through it.

The owner of the hand looked down at the holotable where the starfighter combat had taken place. He was D-V9——or Deevee for short——a silver droid designed to imitate the appearance and behavior of humans. Since his head and face were made of durasteel, the droid couldn't frown, but it gave the definite impression of doing just that. "Tash. Zak. Stop this ridiculous game. "

The two pilots dropped their control disks, and the holographic starfighters, tiny in comparison to the droid looming over them, immediately froze in place. They hung in midair over

the holotable, along with the computer-generated moon and planet that served as a playing field.

The holotable was in a corner of a small lounge, which was in the forward compartment of a star cruiser called the *Lightrunner*, which was at that moment hurtling through hyperspace.

The X-wing pilot stood up from the holotable. His name was Zak Arranda. He brushed back a lock of his messy brown hair and grinned at his opponent.

The TIE fighter's pilot was his sister, Tash. At thirteen, she was a year older than her brother, and an inch taller. Her thick blond hair was arranged in a neat braid, and her lightly freckled face was turned down in a serious frown.

"You are *sooo* lucky," she repeated.

"That was prime!" Zak laughed. "And anyway it's not luck, it's skill."

Tash wasn't convinced. "No one could have gotten away from that barrage. Besides, everyone knows all hologames are rigged so the Imperial ships have an advantage. The Empire would never let anyone else come out on top. But you always win." She shook her head. "I just don't get it."

"What you will get," said the impatient droid beside her, "is dull-witted from playing hologames. They're an utter waste of time. Besides, it's time for your zoology lesson." The droid put his hands on his swivel-socketed hips and waited.

"Lessons?" Zak groaned. "We're in the middle of hyperspace!"

Deevee delivered the electronic version of a sniff. "There is no respite from learning."

Or from bionic baby-sitters, Zak thought; aloud, he argued, "But hologames are educational. They improve hand-eye coordination and encourage quick thinking, and——"

"And we're ready for lessons, Deevee," Tash interrupted.

Not that she was very interested in zoology. She would much rather be reading one of her data files on Jedi lore or downloading information from the HoloNet. But sometimes it was good to set an example for a younger brother.

Besides, she hated——*really* hated——being the Imperial TIE fighter——ever since the Empire had blown her and Zak's homeworld of Alderaan to bits. Zak and Tash had been away for two weeks and had returned home to find that, well, their home was gone. Their parents, friends, and neighbors were all killed in the explosion.

Deevee punched a few commands into the holotable's control panel. "Zoology lessons," the droid muttered to no one in particular. If he could have, he would have rolled his eyes. "I have the brain capacity of a supercomputer and I'm giving zoology lessons."

Zak and Tash hardly noticed. Deevee had been complaining about his new job since the day they had come to live with Uncle Hoole.

D-V9 was a class-one scientific research unit with an OmniTask computer brain fast enough to calculate and record ten million bits of information about alien cultures per second. He had been carefully designed to help his master, Hoole the anthropologist, with important research into cultures across the galaxy. He was the envy of every droid he knew——until six months ago, when he was stuck with the job of caretaker to two young orphans.

Deevee didn't like his new assignment, and he reminded Zak and Tash of it every chance he got.

At the droid's command, the star-battle program melted away and was replaced by a stream of holograms detailing various animals throughout the galaxy. The program settled on one odd image: an enormous, fanged beast, sitting without moving while three or four tiny birds fluttered in and out of its mouth. A recorded voice said: "One of the more unusual relationships in galactic nature is this one. The bloodthirsty rancor will kill everything it sees... except the gibbit bird, which roams freely inside the rancor's mouth. The rancor allows this because the gibbit birds pick the flesh from the rancor's jaws, and this helps keep the rancor's teeth clean..."

Unfortunately, as the zoology lesson continued, Tash found herself drifting off. She was a good student, but science was not her favorite subject. Tash slipped a datapad out of her pocket and held it in her lap, where neither Zak nor Deevee could see it. She keyed in a command, and the screen lit up with lines of text.

It was a story about the Jedi Knights.

It was also illegal. Legends of the Jedi Knights had been banned by the Empire since before Tash was born. But one day Tash had come across a story uploaded onto the galaxywide communications service known as the HoloNet. Sitting at her desk in her room on Alderaan, Tash could sign on to the HoloNet and scan libraries on distant planets or talk to people on worlds light-years away. One day she discovered a coded message filed under a word Tash had never seen before: *Jedi*. It had taken her hours to break the code, but finally the file had unscrambled before her eyes.

The story Tash discovered was written by someone code-named ForceFlow, and it told the history of the Jedi Knights, a group of people who used something called the Force to protect the galaxy from evil.

According to the story, the Jedi Knights had been the guardians of the Old Republic for a thousand generations. The only weapon a Jedi carried, Tash had learned, was a lightsaber, a handheld weapon made of pure energy. But the Jedi used violence only as a last resort. Instead they relied upon a mysterious power known as the Force.

Curious, Tash had sent a message to ForceFlow, hoping to learn more. But ForceFlow didn't respond, and his original story was erased from the Net.

After that, Tash kept her eye out for any information on the Jedi. She visited libraries, scanned the Net, and talked to anyone who had a story about the Jedi or knew of the Force. She hoped to meet a Jedi someday. She hoped to *be* one someday. But soon after the first story was wiped from the Net, all information about the Jedi vanished from the public records. It was replaced

by a single report, stamped with the Imperial seal, stating that the Jedi had died out when the Old Republic gave way to the Empire. According to the official reports, the Jedi were...

"Extinct," Deevee droned. "Imagine that."

Tash looked up from her datapad. D-V9 was standing beside the image of a flock of blue-winged birds. The image was fading, and Deevee was obviously wrapping up his commentary. She had missed the entire lesson.

"Well, that's enough for today," the droid said. "There will be an exam on this lesson next week."

Excused by their tutor, Zak and Tash escaped from the lounge. Tash looked at her brother and could see that she wasn't the only one who'd been daydreaming.

"What's on your mind?" she said.

"Home. Alderaan. Skimboarding in the park." Zak paused. "Mom and Dad. I miss them."

"Me too," Tash said softly. Just thinking about her parents made her want to cry. But she was the older sister and couldn't cry in front of Zak. "Uncle Hoole's our family now."

Zak sulked. "Not really. He's——"

"Not even human," Tash finished.

"Yeah, and he's——"

"Only related to us because his brother married Aunt Beryl."

"Right," said Zak. "I don't even——"

"Know why he bothered to take us in?"

"Stop that!" Zak glared at his sister. She had an annoying habit of finishing other people's sentences.

"Sorry," his sister replied. She hadn't noticed she was doing it again. "But we've talked about Uncle Hoole before. He's not human——he's a Shi'ido. They believe all their relatives are part of their close family. So Hoole felt that he had to take us in when..." She could hardly say it. "When Mom and Dad died. We should be happy we get to live with someone who cares about us."

"He never shows it. He always looks like he's going to a funeral."

"You're just too hard on him." Tash argued harder than she believed. "He can be very friendly."

"Oh, yeah?" Zak huffed. "Then what's his first name?"

"Well, that's easy, his name is... I mean, I'm sure I've heard him... That is..." She stopped. Now that she thought about it, Uncle Hoole never had told them his first name. "Maybe he doesn't have a first name," she decided. "Maybe he's just Hoole."

"Maybe," Zak said with a sudden gleam in his eyes, "he just doesn't want us to know. Maybe it's something secret. Maybe there's a price on his head!"

"Zak Arranda, your imagination is galactic."

"Maybe he's part of the Rebellion and that's why he moves around so much. "

Tash was growing impatient. "Bring it in for a landing, Zak. He's an anthropologist. He goes to different planets to study the species that live there."

"Sure, that's what he tells us. But if that's all there is, why does he keep his name a secret? I'm going to find out."

"How are you going to do that?"

"Easy. I'll check his cabin." Zak turned to go. "You can't do that! It's rude. Besides, what if he finds you?"

"He won't find me," Zak said. "He's in the ship's library, doing research. He's *always* in the ship's library, doing research." Zak turned to go. "Want to help?"

"No," Tash said firmly. "It's not something a Jedi Knight would do."

"You're *not* a Jedi Knight."

"I'm still not going."

"Come on. It's not as though I'm going to dig through his personal files. I'm just going to glance at his desk to see if his name is on anything."

His sister shook her head. "I'm going back to the cockpit to practice my piloting."

"Suit yourself." Zak turned and hurried down the hall.

Tash frowned after him. At least she had gotten him to think about something besides their parents. Now if someone could just do the same for her.

While Tash headed toward the cockpit, Zak crept toward the ship's living quarters. The last cabin belonged to Uncle Hoole. Zak pressed the caller.

No answer.

Zak pressed the opener and the door slid back with a soft *whoosh!*

And Zak found himself staring into the face of a fanged and drooling monster. Its bulk filled the doorway, and it was so close that Zak could smell its hot, stinking breath.

He cried out and stumbled backward, tripping over his own feet and falling to the ground. The creature lunged forward and bent over him. One clawed hand reached for his throat.

Chapter Two

The creature grabbed Zak's shirt and pulled him to his feet. "What are you doing here!" it demanded in a voice like sliding gravel.

"I——I...," Zak stammered. He could feel the creature's putrid breath on his face.

The creature paused. It let go of Zak's shirt and took a step back. Then, before Zak's eyes, its flesh began to quiver and crawl. The monster's entire body squirmed and changed shape. After only a few seconds, it had transformed into something close to human. But its dark gray skin and extra-long fingers revealed it to be quite different.

"Uncle Hoole," Zak gasped. "It's you."

"You are in my cabin," Hoole said sternly. "Who else would you find here?"

Zak's knees were still shaking, but he felt relieved. He should have known this would happen eventually. Uncle Hoole was a Shi'ido. Although they looked mostly human, Shi'ido were aliens with a very nonhuman ability: They could change shape.

"Sorry," he said with one final shudder. "I just didn't... I mean, I've never seen you do that before. What *was* that thing you turned yourself into?"

Hoole turned his back on Zak and began to examine a small datapad. "A creature I observed in my travels. It keeps my shape-changing skills in practice," he replied.

"Practice for what?"

Hoole's gaze was like a blaster bolt. "For eating annoying small boys."

Tash believed it was her job as the older sister to make things easier for Zak, but she missed her parents terribly. She remembered the day she heard they were dead: She felt so lost and alone that she thought she'd go crazy.

The truth was, although she missed Alderaan, the only people she really missed were her parents. Tash had always had trouble making friends——other kids thought she was weird because she was always finishing their sentences or making predictions about what day a pop quiz was going to be held or getting strange feelings about things. Usually they were sad or frightening things. Like the day her parents died. She knew it had happened even though she was light-years away.

She felt like something was suddenly torn out of her. That had been the worst time, but not the first time.

When she had heard the news, Tash had wanted to lock herself in her room forever. But Zak wouldn't let her. He was just as sad and scared as she was, but he showed it in a different way. He stopped being afraid of anything. He became a daredevil, risking his neck on silly stunts like skimboarding, his current dangerous hobby. Tash knew he needed someone to watch over him. And she found to her surprise that she actually *liked* the little womp rat.

So instead of closing herself off from the galaxy, Tash had decided to face it with him.

And she had made a promise to herself that she would never lose anyone close to her ever again.

Tash entered the *Lightrunner*'s cockpit, with all its delicate instruments and gauges. The pilot and copilot's seats were empty, because the *Lightrunner* was operating on automatic.

Tash slid into the pilot's seat. She double-checked to make sure the navigational systems were securely locked on automatic, then grabbed the two levers that controlled the main thrusters.

In her mind she saw an image far sharper than any holographic projection.

The Imperial battle station was surrounded by a gauntlet of TIE fighters, itching to test themselves against a young Jedi Knight.

Lost in her imagination, Tash was eager to meet their challenge.

Zak hadn't given up on Uncle Hoole. In fact, staring at Uncle Hoole's back while the anthropologist pored over his work, Zak became angry.

It wasn't fair. Hoole had volunteered to take them, but he refused to tell them anything about himself. He didn't even tell them where they were going. That bothered Zak, and he knew it bothered his sister, too. For the last six months, Hoole had dragged them all across the galaxy on his research, but he never explained what he was doing.

"Where are we headed?" Zak finally demanded.

Hoole looked up from his work. He scowled at Zak. "Are you still here? Oh, very well. The planet is called D'vouran. Does it mean anything to you?"

"No."

"Then go away."

"What are you going to do there?" Zak asked.

Hoole was exasperated. He handed Zak his computerized datapad. "Read this file. But *only* this file!"

The file Zak read told him the planet's story.

D'vouran was a typical life-bearing planet: tree-covered continents, salty blue oceans, and fresh, breathable air. According to rumor, it was the richest and most beautiful planet within a thousand light-years. It was inhabited by creatures who called themselves Enzeen. They were intelligent and very friendly. Considering the hundreds of magnificent unstudied planets in

the galaxy, D'vouran didn't seem worth an anthropologist's time. Except for one thing.

No one had ever noticed it before.

D'vouran was less than a light-year from one of the galaxy's busiest space lanes, and yet it had never appeared on anyone's star charts. One day the planet wasn't there, and the next day it *was*.

"That's impossible, of course," Hoole said as Zak finished reading. "Planets do not just appear out of nowhere. It's a mistake in the star charts. "

"Oh." Without thinking, Zak pressed Next on the datapad, and a new file popped onto the screen. He saw the words IMPERIAL ORDERS and PAYMENT RECEIVED just as Hoole snatched the pad from his hand.

"I told you to read nothing else!"

"Sorry, I was just-"

"You were just snooping," Hoole interrupted. "Don't ever snoop in my cabin again." The Shi'ido turned back toward Zak, towering frighteningly over him. "If you do, you will be very, very sorry."

Hoole took another step forward and Zak gulped. Whatever Hoole planned to do next, he never got the chance. Both he and Zak were thrown to the floor by a sudden jolt. The *Lightrunner* shuddered and groaned as though some giant force had grabbed hold of it. Over the scream of the engines, Zak heard his uncle cry, "We're out of control!"

Chapter Three

Zak and Uncle Hoole rushed to the cockpit, stumbling every time the ship shuddered. When they reached the pilot's room, Tash was still sitting at the controls, her knuckles white with fear and her eyes wide.

"I didn't do anything!" she said in a panic. "I didn't touch anything!"

Through the viewport, they could see that the white blur of hyperspace was gone. They were in realspace, and the *Lightrunner* was plunging toward a blue-green planet.

Uncle Hoole's jaw tightened as he looked at Tash. "Move."

She scrambled out of the way as Hoole slipped into the pilot's chair and began to work the controls at a frantic pace. Deevee came up last, his gyros struggling to maintain their balance. The droid dropped into the copilot's chair and began to help his master.

"We're going to crash!" Zak shouted.

The planet surface was rushing up to meet them. Hoole's hands flew across the *Lightrunner*'s control panels. At first nothing changed-they continued to plummet as the planet grew larger and larger. But their uncle hit one last button and pulled back on the control stick, and the *Lightrunner* pulled out of its nosedive.

"I didn't touch anything I wasn't supposed to," Tash said in a small voice.

"What happened?" Zak asked.

Uncle Hoole pointed to an indicator light. "The ship has been dragged out of hyperspace."

Zak and Tash still had a lot to learn about astrophysics, but they understood the principles of space travel as well as they understood basic math. Starships used two different types of engines. Hyperdrives propelled vessels through an alternate dimension known as hyper-space, which allowed them to travel great distances in a short period. These powerful engines only worked in the absence of gravity. When on or near a planet, starships used their slower sublight engines.

Hoole continued, "I told the navicomputer to plot a course that would automatically take us out of hyperdrive just before we reached the planet D'vouran. But..."

"But what?" Zak asked.

Hoole double-checked his readouts. "We seemed to have arrived at our destination fifteen minutes ahead of schedule."

Zak said, "And D'vouran's gravity yanked the *Lightrunner* right out of hyperspace!"

Tash studied the innocent-looking blue-green planet. "You mean that planet tried to suck us in?"

Zak rolled his eyes. "Please, it's only gravity, Tash. Uncle Hoole, it's got to be a mistake in the navicomputer. Either that or the planet moved."

Hoole did not take his eyes off his instruments. "Planets do not change course. And there's nothing wrong with the navicomputer." He spared a brief, irritated glance at Tash. "Most likely the instruments were interfered with."

"I didn't touch anything I wasn't supposed to," Tash repeated.

But Hoole wasn't satisfied. "You were in here daydreaming again. This is a working starship, not a place for you to pretend you're a Jedi Knight."

Tash muttered, "Sorry," and looked down at her shoes.

Hoole ignored her apology. "Buckle yourselves in. The ride down will not be smooth."

That was an understatement. The sublight engines threatened to fail with every passing moment, and the ship's stabilizers had shorted. As they descended through D'vouran's gravity, every bolt in the *Lightrunner*'s frame shrieked at the strain. Through it all, Uncle Hoole remained cool and collected. Only the tightness in his jaw and his furrowed brow revealed his concern.

"Are we going to make it?" Zak asked as the *Lightrunner*'s engines sputtered.

Hoole didn't answer.

Through the observation port, Tash saw clouds roll back and, beneath them, a green forest laid out like a blanket. In the distance, a white spot appeared, growing steadily larger. The ship groaned as Hoole banked toward it.

"Is that a spaceport?" Zak said. "It looks more like a junk heap."

The *Lightrunner* did not fall apart. The engines kept them aloft as Hoole guided the ship onto the small launch deck. As the massive repulsors took over, lowering the cruiser clumsily to the tarmac, Hoole sighed with relief. But then the *Lightrunner* gave one final shudder and the engines died.

"That is not encouraging," Hoole said. "We should look at the engines."

"All right!" yelled Zak, a born tinkerer. "Let's go, Tash."

"Right behind you."

Tash was still sulking after the near accident. She was sure she hadn't damaged anything on the ship. She had been daydreaming about the Jedi Knights, but she didn't deserve to be scolded for it.

Because she was still surly, she lagged behind her brother on his way to the exit. She would rather have a tooth pulled than look at a starship engine. By the time she had unbuckled her crash webbing, Zak and Uncle Hoole had lowered the ramp and were outside.

The moment Tash reached the door, a hole opened up in the pit of her stomach. She was overcome by a feeling of dread-as though some terrible evil was looming right before her eyes, staring at her, about to pounce on her. She had gotten such a feeling once before-on the day her parents died. She shivered.

But there was nothing there. She peeked out the hatch, but all she saw was the spaceport's landing pad and the blue sky above it. Still, the feeling lingered. Something was out there.

"Zak? Uncle Hoole?" she whispered. "Deevee?"

No answer.

Tash crept out of the *Lightrunner*'s door. The spaceport was very quiet. Most star ports were crowded with ships coming and going, workers unloading cargo, pilots hurrying to and from dozens of flight decks, and maintenance droids busily trying to repair the wear and tear of constant arrivals and departures. Not this place. D'vouran's spaceport looked deserted, and there were only a few ships on its flight deck. All of them looked like flying junk heaps-the thrown-together ships of poor travelers on the move.

The feeling of being watched was still there.

Tash took another step out. Where was her brother? "Zak?" she whispered…

... As something cold and slimy dropped around her neck.

Chapter Four

"Aaaagh! she cried, pulling at the thing that grabbed her. It was soft and squishy, and when she yanked, it broke away. Tash saw that her hand was full of flowers.

"Nice going, Tash," Zak laughed, stepping around the side of the ship with Deevee beside him. He and Deevee both had necklaces of flowers around their necks. "I'm sure the Enzeen really appreciate you tearing their gifts apart."

Zak pointed at a person standing right beside Tash. She had been too nervous to see the man-well, not a man exactly. He was definitely humanlike, except that he had blue skin, and instead of hair, the top of his head was covered with short needlelike spines. He was plump, with chubby fingers and a round face covered mostly by a very friendly smile. He was holding a pile of flowered hoops. "Welcome to D'vouran. I am Chood, an Enzeen."

"N-Nice to meet you," Tash stammered. "Sorry about the, um..."

"Friendship necklace," Chood finished pleasantly. "That's quite all right. Have another." He hung another flower necklace around her neck.

"The Enzeen use these to welcome people to their planet," explained Deevee, coming up closer from around the side of the ship. "A nuisance, if you ask me.

"If you'd come out with us, you wouldn't have been so surprised," Zak added.

"Where were you?" Tash asked. "I called your name."

Zak pointed toward the tail end of the ship. "Sorry. Uncle Hoole had opened up the exterior panels to the lateral stabilizer, and I went with him to watch. I've never seen the inside of an ion thruster before."

"Thrilling," Deevee said, sounding as sarcastic as a droid could.

Uncle Hoole appeared, wiping oil from his hands and frowning even more than usual. "The damage is severe. Chood, is there anyone on D'vouran who can help us repair our ship?"

The Enzeen looked sympathetic. "I'm sorry. We Enzeen are not great travelers, and we don't know much about starships. In fact, we have very little use for any technology. However, there are several starpilots on the planet who may be able to help. Most of them spend time at the local cantina."

"Excellent," Hoole said. "Would you take us there?"

The Enzeen bowed low. "I would be honored to assist."

Chood led them down a flight of wide stairs and out of the spaceport. Just outside the exit stood a large sign in Basic, the common language most species in the galaxy used. It read:

WELCOME TO D'VOURAN. OUR GOAL IS TO SERVE.

"Now that's a friendly sign," Zak said.

"I guess," Tash responded glumly.

Her brother leaned closer and whispered. "What's the matter with you? This Chood is doing his best to make us welcome here, and you look like someone's planning your funeral."

"I can't help it," she whispered back. "I just have a bad feeling about this place."

"You *always* have bad feelings," he muttered.

Chood led them through a little town next to the spaceport. It seemed primitive to Zak and Tash. They saw no vehicles, and most of the houses were small, one-story structures made of mud. They passed several people. Most of them were human, but there were some aliens among them. Every now and then they would see another Enzeen, and Tash noticed that they all looked very much like Chood, with chubby blue bodies, spikes on their heads, and wide, friendly smiles. Each Enzeen they saw stopped to say hello and welcome them to D'vouran, as though they were old friends.

"Is this the' whole town?" Zak snorted. "There's not even a good skimboard run!"

"This is it," Chood said. "There are a few homes closer to the forest, but most of the houses are here, in town. It's more like a village really."

Chood cheerfully explained the recent history of D'vouran. Ever since it was "discovered" by outsiders, the Enzeen had encouraged people to come to the planet. "There aren't many of us Enzeen," he explained. "And we don't like to travel. Inviting others to D'vouran is our way of learning about the galaxy."

"How was D'vouran discovered?" Zak asked.

"A cargo ship," Chood answered. "It wasn't expecting D'vouran to be here and was surprised by the planet's gravity. It crashed. When a rescue flight from offworld came to investigate, they discovered our planet, and our hospitality. The word spread from there."

Tash noticed that Uncle Hoole wasn't asking questions. So she decided to ask one of her own. "Were there any survivors of the original crash?"

Chood paused. "Only one. The rest died in the crash."

"Have many settlers come here since then?" Zak asked. "I mean, this place sounds pretty boring."

"Zak!" Tash scolded.

But Chood didn't seem offended. At least his smile never wavered. "There are a few hundred here. It's not a bad start for a

planet that still hasn't been put on the official star maps. But there will be more. D'vouran has perfect weather and plenty of natural resources. We expect to have thousands before too long."

"Don't you worry about D'vouran becoming overcrowded?" Tash added.

"Oh, no," the Enzeen replied cheerily. "We enjoy it. We could never get our fill of visitors."

He led them down a short dead-end street. At the end of the street was a squat building with a wide-open door. Loud noise-music mixed with laughter and shouting-came from inside. A sign over the door revealed the cantina's name: THE DON'T GO INN. Tash and Zak both laughed when they saw the sign.

So far, Chood told them, most of the settlers who had come to D'vouran were explorers and treasure-seekers, hoping to strike it rich on an uncharted planet. "But," he added, "we are encouraging families like you to join our happy planet. D'vouran is paradise."

At that moment, someone came flying through the Don't Go Inn's front door, landing face-first in the dusty street.

"Do you think *he* feels that way?" Zak joked.

"I'm afraid," Chood admitted, "we also have our share of ruffians."

"And there they are," Deevee noted.

A crowd of thugs poured out of the Don't Go Inn. They stood on the cantina's porch, jeering down at the man they had just thrown into the street.

"And stay outta here, Bebo!" one man called.

"Stop coming around here with your crazy stories!" another yelled. "We're tired of hearing about invisible monsters!"

"Yeah," snarled another, "we don't need you causin' us problems!" They hurled a few more insults and warnings at their victim before fading back into the shadows of the cantina.

Tash bent down next to the man, who had just crawled to his knees. "Are you all right?"

"They won't listen!" the man croaked. "They just won't listen."

His clothes were filthy rags. His hair was gray under a layer of dirt, and his beard was ragged and thin. He looked like a wild man who had just come out of the wilderness.

"I'll listen," Tash offered.

The man glanced at her suspiciously. He clutched his worn shirt collar. "I won't have you mock me, too! I'm safe enough! I don't have to try to help them or anyone!"

Tash looked at Chood. "Do you know what he's talking about?"

"Pay him no attention," Chood said apologetically. "His name is Bebo. He is harmless, but not completely rational."

The wild man, Bebo, stared at Tash. "I should bring Lonni. They may believe her. Yes, that's it. But I don't think she'll come. She's too afraid. But I've got to try. Yes. That's what I'll do. Lonni."

The man got to his feet and walked off, still muttering to himself.

"I'd say he's a few starships short of a fleet," Zak said.

Chood pointed at the door. "This is the cantina I told you about," Chood explained. "I'm afraid the Don't Go Inn is not the nicest place on D'vouran, but you did want to find a starpilot who could help with your ship. Also, inside you will find all the free food you can eat. Compliments of the Enzeen. "

Zak's eyes lit up. "Free food! I like this place already."

"It will do," Hoole said. "Thank you for your help."

"Please consider yourselves our honored guests on D'vouran. If there is anything we can do, please let me know."

"There is one more thing," the Shi'ido replied. "I will be conducting some... business... starting tomorrow. Zak and Tash will need a place to stay, under the supervision of their caretaker, Deevee." Deevee stifled an electronic screech.

Chood held up one hand. "Please. Say no more. It would be an honor if they would stay with me. My house is not far from here."

"What!" Tash cried. "Uncle Hoole, you never said you were going to leave us!"

Hoole said calmly, "I have anthropological research to do, Tash. I will have no time to watch over you."

"But... but you're going to *leave* us!" she said.

"It won't take long," her uncle promised. "You can obviously rely on Chood, here, and you'll have Deevee. What could be the problem?"

Tash's mouth tightened into a thin straight line. How could she explain it? How could Hoole not understand? Her parents had left them in a stranger's care, and then they died. Now Hoole was doing the same thing. And that feeling of being watched still bothered Tash. But she knew she wouldn't be able to make Hoole understand, so instead she said nothing.

Hoole turned back to Chood. "Then it's settled. Again, I thank you."

Chood bowed. "Our goal is to serve." He told them where he lived, and turned away.

Tash and Zak had been in cantinas before, but never any place like this. Instead of a brightly lit room where people could see what they were eating and drinking, the Don't Go Inn was dark and smoky. Tash couldn't tell how many people were inside because everyone kept to the shadows. Half of them whispered to each other, while the other half shouted loudly around sabacc tables or at the bar.

Once their eyes adjusted to the gloom, Zak and Tash could make out some of the figures in the bar. Most of them were human, but there were a few other species mixed in. They recognized a horn-headed Devaronian, and a wolf-headed Shistavanen, and a gigantic Wookiee towering over a few humans in a corner. Hands, or tentacles, or flippers were wrapped around mugs filled with alien drinks. Every drinker had the hard look of someone who'd been in a lot of fights, and was looking for another one.

The newcomers were about to sit at a small table when a voice boomed, "Hoole!" At the same time, Tash felt a huge hand grab her by the shirt and slam her against a wall.

Someone was pointing a blaster right between her eyes.

Chapter Five

The hand and arm that held the blaster were almost as big as Tash, and the body they were attached to was even bigger. Looking up, Tash recognized the square, ugly face of a Gank.

A Gank *killer*, as they were usually called. She could see why. Its square yellow face was twisted into a permanent snarl, topped by cruel beady eyes. Its massive shoulders looked like small hills, and its arms were as thick as tree trunks. Ganks usually worked as hired guns and bodyguards for rich crime lords. Why had this one decided to pick on her?

Tash got her answer in the next moment. The cantina had fallen silent and still as everyone watched and waited to see what was going to happen next. Out of the corner of her eye, Tash saw that Zak, too, had been grabbed, and there was a blaster pointed at his head as well. Someone was even pointing a blaster at Deevee. Only Uncle Hoole had not been touched. He stood face-to-face with the most disgusting creature Tash had ever seen. It was a giant slug, with two pudgy arms sticking out of its fat, fleshy body. Slobber trickled from the edges of its wide mouth when it talked. It was this creature that had yelled Hoole's name. A moment later, Tash learned who the creature was.

Smada the Hutt.

"Hoole!" Smada the Hutt bellowed again. "What a pleasant surprise this is."

"Tell your thugs to let my niece and nephew go, Smada," Hoole said in a low voice.

"No," the slimy Hutt replied. "Not until we've had a chance to talk. And by the way, the minute you use any of your shape-changing powers, my bodyguards will blast your small friends to bantha fodder."

"Leave us alone!" Zak demanded.

"What do you want?" Tash called out.

Smada the Hutt's flesh jiggled as he chuckled and looked at Tash. "Simple. I want your uncle to work for me. I have need of an assassin to eliminate some of my enemies, and Hoole's shape-changing powers will make him the perfect weapon."

"You're crazy!" Tash replied. "Uncle Hoole's a scientist, not a killer!"

Smada the Hutt laughed. "Ho, ho! Is that so? Well, I'd say there's a lot about your uncle that you don't know."

Tash was taken aback. What did he mean by that?

"You are wasting your time, Smada," Hoole said. "What are you doing on this backwater planet anyway?"

Smada wiped a line of drool from his fat face. "Gang wars on my home planet have made it necessary for me to take a short vacation."

"You mean *hide*, I'll bet," Zak interrupted.

Smada continued. "In fact, those gang wars are the reason I need a new assassin. Until I found one, this new planet seemed like the perfect place to lie low for a while." Smada leaned forward until his putrid face was only a few inches from Hoole's. "And I was right. Because a stroke of luck brought you here, too. And now you will work for me."

Hoole shook his head. "I told you no the last time we met, Smada."

The Hutt growled. "And I told you that no one defies Smada the Hutt. I also told you that if we ever met again, I wouldn't ask

so nicely. So if you don't agree to work for me right now, I'll have your little brats vaporized."

Suddenly a tall man stepped out of the shadows, pointing a well-worn blaster at Smada. "I don't think so," he said.

"This is none of your concern, stranger," Smada growled.

The tall man answered with a cocky grin. "I'm making it my business."

"And mine," said a young woman, who appeared beside the man.

"And mine," said another man with blond hair. He ignited a strange, glowing weapon that looked like a sword made of pure energy. Tash gasped. A Jedi *lightsaber*!

"And his," said the tall man, pointing to the huge Wookiee Tash had seen before. The furry Wookiee let out a threatening roar.

If looks had been lasers, Smada would have incinerated them all. But he obviously didn't want to fight. "D'vouran is a small planet, Hoole. We'll meet again."

Smada signaled to his thugs, who freed Zak and Tash. Tash saw that Smada had been sitting on a hover-sled, a long platform that floated in the air. With his bodyguards around him, Smada the Hutt floated out of the cantina. Since there was nothing left to watch, the rest of the cantina patrons went back to their business, and the noise resumed.

The tall man and the woman holstered their blasters, while the blond man deactivated his lightsaber. Behind them hovered two droids, a stocky R2 unit and a golden protocol droid.

"Oh, what a relief! I was about to short circuit!" the droid said. "Shouldn't we notify the authorities?"

"Pipe down, Threepio," the tall man said. "There aren't any authorities on D'vouran. Just the Enzeen, and they're too friendly to do much about Smada. " He looked at Hoole. "Everyone okay?"

"Yes," Hoole said. "Luckily Smada was more interested in making threats than hurting anyone. Thank you for your help."

"What was that all about?" Tash asked her uncle. "He seemed to know you," the young man with the lightsaber observed.

Hoole hesitated. Finally he said cautiously, "Yes. He... offered me a job several years ago. When I refused to accept, he swore that he would have his revenge. It was a coincidence that brought us together on this planet."

"An unhappy one, I'd say," the woman added. "That Smada's pretty foul- tempered, even for a Hutt."

"I've known worse," the tall man said.

The Shi'ido introduced himself. "My name is Hoole."

"I'm Han Solo. Call me Han," said the tall man. He had the casual confidence of a starpilot. "This is my partner, Chewbacca," he added, indicating the Wookiee. Then he pointed at the woman. "And this is-"

"Princess Leia," Tash finished.

The woman blinked. All the newcomers looked around to make sure no one had overheard. Han Solo's hand crept toward the blaster slung low on his hip.

The young man with the lightsaber saw the movement and said, "It's all right, Han."

But Han growled, "I'm not taking any chances."

The woman,. Leia, gently put her hand over Han's. "Let me handle this." To Tash, she said, "What makes you think that's my name?"

Zak shook his head. "It's gotta be. Tash is always right about stuff like that. It's weird."

Tash said, "It's not so weird! Zak and I live on Alderaan, where you're from. I mean, we did... before it... well, you know."

She could see from the woman's face that Leia knew very well what had happened to Alderaan.

Beside her, Zak almost shouted, "Hey, are you guys *Rebels?*"

"Zak!" Tash hissed.

Han's face turned to a scowl. "We're minding our own business, kid, which is what you should be doing."

"We're... researchers," Leia interrupted gently. "We're looking this planet over for some friends of ours. We were just about to leave, but we couldn't sit back and let that Hutt threaten you."

Tash heard Uncle Hoole reply, "I am a researcher, too." But she remembered the Hutt's words: *There's a lot about your uncle that you don't know.*

There's a lot about everyone I don't know, Tash thought. Leia had been a princess on Alderaan. Whatever she was doing with these people was a lot more important than "research."

"Maybe," Tash said hesitantly, "we could sit down for a while. You could tell us about your *research*—"

"Of course we will," Leia interrupted with a quick glance at Han. "We'll stay at least until we're sure that Hutt doesn't come back around."

The two parties sat down together. Han Solo propped his feet up on an empty chair. "Order anything you want. The food's free you know. These Enzeen will feed you till you're ready to burst."

Uncle Hoole nodded. "We've only met one, but he seems extremely friendly. "

To Zak's delight, they did order food from a passing waiter. Moments later the Enzeen reappeared with plates piled high with all sorts of exotic meats, pastries, and fruits. Zak wrinkled his nose at a dish full of eight- legged insects covered in a pink sauce. But when he dipped a finger into the sauce and tasted it, his eyes lit up and he began shoveling it in. The only one at the table who kept up with him was the Wookiee.

Tash had no appetite. Her stomach was in a knot-the feeling of fear had not gone away. She was trying to ignore it. It was probably just her imagination anyway, and she refused to make a fool of herself the way she'd done when the Enzeen put the flowers around her neck.

As they began to eat, everyone relaxed. Even Han Solo seemed to be interested as Uncle Hoole and Zak described their journey. But Tash drifted from one conversation to another,

unable to concentrate. Deevee had been cornered by C-3P0 and his companion, R2-D2.

"... and then I found myself alone on the planet Tatooine, wandering through that terrible desert!" Threepio was saying. "It was perfectly dreadful."

"Fascinating, I'm sure," Deevee replied. He looked as bored as a droid could look.

"Wait until you hear what happened next!" Threepio trilled.

"I don't suppose you were deactivated or anything convenient like that?" Deevee asked.

"Well, no."

"Too bad," the unhappy droid muttered. "Well, you might as well go on, then,..."

Tash could barely pay attention. Maybe it was the exotic food, or maybe the feeling of being watched was growing stronger, but she thought she might be sick. The sensation was so strong that she had actually forgotten about the blond man with the Jedi lightsaber, until he leaned across the table to speak to her. "Is everything all right?" he asked.

"Um, yeah. Fine," she said.

The young man smiled. "Your name's Tash, right? I'm Luke. Luke Skywalker. "

Something about him made her feel strange. Not "strange" like the crushes she'd had on boys back on Alderaan-she had outgrown crushes anyway. This was a sense of... relief. Tash felt as if she'd been waiting to meet someone like Luke Skywalker all her life.

His blue eyes stared at her like a scanner reaching into her deepest thoughts. "Something's troubling you."

"I guess," Tash began. She never liked telling people about the feelings she sometimes got. But she found herself confiding in him easily. "I guess I feel a little uneasy here. I don't know what exactly, but something's bothering me. It's probably just my imagination." She didn't expect him to understand, since no one ever understood.

To her surprise, Luke said, "Not too long ago, a good friend taught me a very important lesson: trust your feelings."

From the next chair, Chewbacca barked a question at Hoole, and Han translated. "So you say you dropped out of hyperspace fifteen minutes too early?"

Uncle Hoole nodded. "It caused a great deal of damage to our ship."

"The same thing happened to us. My ship, the *Millennium Falcon*, got shaken up pretty good." The starpilot shook his head. "I don't know, maybe it's just an error in the star charts."

"Perhaps," Uncle Hoole agreed. "But in our case, I think it was some problems we had on board." He glared at Tash.

Zak laughed. "He means Tash. She was playing Jedi Knight in the cockpit."

Tash felt her face grow red. Luke Skywalker raised an eyebrow and gave her a knowing smile. "So you want to be a Jedi, do you?"

"I've read about them," she confessed. "My parents were on Alderaan when it... you know. I always thought that if there were more Jedi, they wouldn't have let it happen."

"They do their best, Tash," Luke said. "That's all any of us can do."

"Are-are you a Jedi?" she asked almost in a whisper, pointing at his lightsaber.

Luke shook his head. "I wish I could say yes. But no, I'm not. This lightsaber belonged to my father."

Tash nodded sadly. "They say all the Jedi are gone now. So I don't know how I'd ever find one to teach me."

Luke put his hand on her shoulder. He whispered, "Don't give up hope yet. You might be surprised. A Jedi might come looking for you someday."

Tash wanted to know what he meant by that. But she didn't get a chance to ask. Because at that moment, someone screamed.

Chapter Six

The scream came from outside, somewhere near the cantina. Most of the patrons looked up just long enough to make sure they were in no danger, then ignored the cries. They had come to this new planet to escape trouble, not to find it.

But everyone at Tash's table jumped up and ran toward the door. The cries were coming from behind the cantina. Their new friends-Tash was now sure they were Rebels, because they acted with so much courage-drew their weapons.

But the street was deserted except for the wild man, Bebo. He was on his knees, scratching at the dirt and shouting. "No! No! No!"

Tash was not afraid of Bebo. "What's wrong?" she asked him.

"She's gone! She's gone!" The madman croaked. "My friend Lonni was standing here a minute ago, and she just vanished!"

"What do you mean 'vanished'?" Hoole asked.

Bebo stood up. The light in his eyes had become fierce. "I mean vanished! Gone! Disappeared! And it's all my fault! I convinced her to come out of hiding. To warn everyone! They didn't believe me, but they might believe her. She came because I told her she'd be safe! But she's gone. She was standing here, and then she wasn't!"

Although no one from the cantina had come out, a few settlers had come to investigate the shouting. These people were a more wholesome-looking crowd, Tash noted. Probably the families and pioneers Chood had mentioned. But they seemed as uninterested in Bebo's ravings as the cantina patrons. In fact, most of them were laughing.

Someone called out, "Go ahead, Bebo! Tell us another!"

"Yeah," someone added, "Tell us about vanishing people!"

"And invisible monsters!"

"Or was it invisible people and vanishing monsters?"

The crowd laughed at the joke. Chood appeared, and for a split second, Tash thought she saw the smile leave his face at the sight of Bebo. But it reappeared again, as bright as ever. "May I be of service?"

Tash pointed to Bebo. "He needs help. A friend of his disappeared."

Chood sighed. "I'm sorry if this has troubled anyone. Unfortunately Bebo has done this many times before. I assure you that no one has disappeared."

"Lonni disappeared!" Bebo's voice dropped into a whisper. "She was my only friend."

Tash felt something tug at her heart. She knew what it was like to lose someone.

One of the settlers called out, "You're crazy, Bebo!"

Chood nodded. "Sadly, it's true. Ever since he came here, poor Bebo has been ranting and raving about disappearances."

"It's true!" Bebo responded. "They died. The entire crew of the *Misanthrope*! They disappeared!"

Chood gazed sympathetically at Bebo, then turned to Hoole and the others and said softly, "This is a sad tale. The *Misanthrope* was the cargo ship that first crashed here. Bebo, here, was the captain and the only survivor. I'm afraid the guilt was too much for his mind. It snapped."

"No, no, no!" Bebo argued. "They disappeared. All of them!"

"He should be treated at a mental facility," observed Deevee.

"It's not that simple," Chood replied. "The official report said that he was responsible for the crash. If he leaves the planet, he'll be thrown into prison. But we Enzeen are a little more sympathetic, so we let him live here, despite the fact that he continually disrupts the environment we try to create for our settlers."

"Have you followed up on his claims that there were other survivors?" Hoole asked. "Who is this Lonni person he talks of?"

"There was a full investigation of the crash," the Enzeen replied. "And the Imperial officials declared no survivors. This person Bebo is raving about could not have lived."

"That's a lie!" Bebo snapped. "She was here!"

"Oh, really?" Chood said. His voice was still very calm and pleasant. "Then, please tell me, Bebo, where was your friend when she disappeared?"

Bebo pointed at the ground. "Right there! Right there! We were walking along, and *poof!* she was gone!"

"Walking along, you say? Are those your footprints, then?" Chood pointed at a line of footprints in the dirt road.

"Yes! That's where I was."

"Then where are your friend's footprints?" the Enzeen asked.

"Why they're right..." For the first time, Bebo stopped muttering to himself. There were no other footprints on the ground. There was no sign that anyone but Bebo had been standing there. "But she was right there! Right there!"

Chood shrugged. "You see. He is quite mad. It is most regrettable."

"Can't you help him? At least search the village?" Tash asked.

"We can, but we won't find anything," Chood says. "People who wish to be found on D'vouran are easy to find. Those who wish to hide, well, it's a large planet."

By this time, most of the settlers had lost interest and gone about their business. Uncle Hoole, too, wanted to move on. "Let's go, Tash," he said. "These people have offered to help us fix the *Lightrunner*, and we can't keep them waiting."

As the others turned away, Tash said softly to Bebo, "I'm sorry I can't help you. I wish there was something I could do for you."

Bebo gave her a cold, hard look. "It doesn't matter. Before long you'll be dead. You're all going to die."

Chapter Seven

The look on Bebo's face still haunted Tash as she followed her brother and the others back to the spaceport. Han and Chewbacca examined the *Lightrunner*'s engines, and Han nodded confidently. "Don't worry. We'll have her asteroid-hopping in no time."

"He means it," Leia said. "If he can keep his own scrap pile in the air, he can sure handle your ship."

Han looked hurt. "The *Falcon* is the best ship in the galaxy." He pointed his finger at a saucer-shaped freighter across the landing bay.

"That's your ship?" Zak asked. "I thought it was a garbage scow."

"Zak!" Tash chided.

But Han had obviously met with this reaction before. "Tell you what, kid. You keep quiet for about half an hour while I work, and I'll show you some things about the *Falcon* that the Imperial engineers would love to get their hands on."

As they went to work, Tash paced about anxiously. She couldn't get Bebo's hurt, angry look out of her mind, and his voice whispered in her ear: *You're all going to die!*

Luke Skywalker appeared beside her. "Still have that feeling?"

"Yeah," she replied, once again surprised at his perceptiveness. "I couldn't help feeling sorry for Bebo. I don't know why, but I felt like he was telling the truth. I feel like I should check out his story."

Luke said seriously, "I meant what I said. You should trust your feelings."

She thought for a moment. "For what I want to do, I need to get on the HoloNet, and I can't do that until the *Lightrunner* is up and running again."

"Why not use the computer aboard the *Millennium Falcon*?" Luke offered.

A few minutes later, Tash was sitting at a cluttered computer station inside the battered freighter. She studied the computer setup. Han Solo wasn't kidding about modifications. Even the computer looked rigged.

"What's that?" she asked, pointing at a small black box attached to the computer terminal.

"I'm not sure," Luke said. "But I think it's a trace detector. It signals you whenever someone is locking on to your computer signal."

"Why would you need that?" Tash asked.

Luke grinned. "Let's just say Han doesn't always work with the most trustworthy people."

Tash left it at that. Powering up the computer, she entered a few quick commands and logged onto the HoloNet News Service. Then she typed:

SEARCH REQUEST: MISANTHROPE.

The computer responded quickly.

SEARCH WORD MISANTHROPE RETURNED SIX HUNDRED ITEMS. DISPLAY ALL?

Tash groaned. That was far too many. She had to narrow down her search. She typed again.

SEARCH REQUEST: MISANTHROPE AND D'VOURAN.

The computer responded:

TWO ITEMS FOUND. DISPLAY?

The first item looked like an official Imperial report. Tash displayed it. The report described the loss of the cargo ship and the subsequent search. She was hoping to find something in the report that might prove Bebo's story- that there had been survivors. But she lost hope as she read the report.

THE MISANTHROPE WENT DOWN WITH ALL HANDS ABOARD. ONLY THE PILOT, CAPTAIN KEVREB BEBO, SURVIVED. BEBO IS CURRENTLY WANTED FOR QUESTIONING, BUT IS AT LARGE.

She sighed. "Oh, well, I guess that's it, then. He really is mad from guilt."

The second file, oddly enough, was in code. "That's strange. Why would a news-service report be in code?"

"That's an Imperial code," Luke noted. "You'd better not mess with it."

Tash smirked. She started to enter signals, trying to break through the security system that kept her from reading the Imperial messages. But she had only entered a few commands when the little black box screeched an alarm.

"What's that?" she cried, almost jumping out of her seat.

Luke replied, `The trace detector! Someone's trying to track you down."

"What do I do?" she asked in a panic. The alarm grew louder.

"Shut it down!"

She slapped the Off key. The computer screen faded to black, and the alarm cut off. Tash felt her heart flutter. "What was that all about?"

"I don't know," Luke said. "But obviously the Empire wants to know about anyone asking questions about D'vouran."

Tash and Luke returned to the *Lightrunner* to find Chewbacca sitting with Zak, who was tinkering with a flat board. It was a little over one meter long and a half meter wide, and filled with intricate circuitry.

"Hey, Tash!" Zak said happily. "Chewbacca here is helping me rewire my skimboard! It's going to be souped up fast enough to race a speeder bike!"

Nearby, Deevee said dryly, "And I hope the Wookiee is prepared to pay your medical bills when you break your neck."

Han wiped maintenance oil from his hands as he said to Hoole, "That should do you for the short run. Your lateral stabilizer's damaged, and you'll need an overhaul, but the ship'll get you off planet."

Hoole said his thanks as Han and his friends prepared to leave.

Tash said very shyly to Luke Skywalker, "I didn't realize you were going so soon. I wanted to ask you about... about your lightsaber. And," her voice dropped to an embarrassed whisper, "about the Force."

He smiled warmly. "I'm not sure how much I could tell you, Tash. But we may meet again some day and you and I can have a talk then."

An electric tingle rose up Tash's hand as Luke shook it. The tingle lasted long after the *Millennium Falcon* had blasted into the sky.

It was growing dark by the time they left the spaceport for a second time. Following the directions they had been given, Uncle Hoole led them to Chood's house. The Enzeen lived in the forest, not far from the settlement.

Chood welcomed them warmly to his home. It was a modest house, with three or four rooms connected by a long hallway. Although it was well built, Tash was surprised to find that, like the streets outside, the floor was uncovered, leaving only bare dirt.

"We have our traditions," Chood said when she noticed. "We like to keep in touch with the planet that is our home."

Chood certainly did love D'vouran. For an hour, Hoole, Tash, and Zak listened as he told them about the planet, singing the praises of its landscapes, its resources, its potential.

"He sounds,". Zak whispered to Tash, "like a used landspeeder salesman."

Toward the end of the conversation, Tash found herself yawning. It had been a long, strange day-from their near crash to the incident in the cantina to meeting Luke Skywalker. She was tired. Beside her, Zak was nodding off.

Hoole noticed. "I think it is time for Zak and Tash to sleep. And time for me to be on my way."

"Where are you going?" Tash asked. She was so sleepy that she'd forgotten Hoole's usual secrecy about his work.

He reminded her instantly. "That is my affair. I will be back before morning. Excuse me."

Without another word, Hoole left.

"Don't Shi'ido ever sleep?" Zak yawned. "He's always running off somewhere."

"It's not because he's a Shi'ido," Tash replied. "It's just that he's Uncle Hoole, and there's more to him than meets the eye." *And*, she added to herself, *I'm going to find out what it is.*

Tash and Zak shared a large room where two small but comfortable sleeping mats lay on the floor. Once they were alone, Tash turned to her brother.

"I can't shake this feeling, Zak. Whatever I do, I feel like someone's watching me." She told him about the coded Imperial file about D'vouran, and the trace alert. "Suppose the Imperials know something about this planet that we don't?"

Zak had been nearly asleep. "Tash, I'm as mad at the Empire as you are. But what could they know about this planet that would be so bad? Don't you think you're taking this Jedi thing a little too far? It's like your looking for something to be wrong. This place is great!"

"You think having blasters pointed at you is great?"

"Yeah," he replied sleepily.

That's because you don't know any better, she wanted to say. But didn't. "I wish I had your confidence," she said instead.

"Just ease up on your thrusters and relax," he yawned. "Now excuse me. I wanna go skimboarding tomorrow, and I need my sleep."

Tash stayed awake longer. But finally she, too, fell asleep.

***

A sound woke her in the middle of the night. At first she thought it was Zak snoring, but her brother was sleeping quietly across the room. She could just make out the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed softly.

She listened carefully.

Slurp-Slurp.

She listened more closely.

Slurp-Slurp.

"Zak?" she whispered. "Do you hear that?" No answer. Her brother was sound asleep.

Tash lay in bed, wondering what to do. The sound started, stopped, and started again several times. What could it be?

Finally she couldn't stand it anymore. Tash got up and crept to the door to their room. The sound was coming from inside the house.

Stealthily she opened the door and tiptoed into the hallway.

Slurp-Slurp. Slurp-Slurp.

The common room. That's where the sound came from. Tash crept forward, pressing flat against the wall. Her pulse raced, but something pushed her forward. Not curiosity, exactly. More like a terrible feeling that not knowing what it was would be more awful than finding out. Her heart pounded so loudly she was sure someone could hear it.

Slurp——

The sound stopped. She heard something shuffle through the darkness of the common room. Tash gathered herself, then carefully peeked around the corner. The room was empty.

"May I help you?"

Tash choked on the scream that tried to burst from her throat.

Chood was standing behind her. Even in the darkness, she could tell that he was still smiling.

"Um... I thought I heard something," she whispered.

"Stray animals, no doubt," the Enzeen explained. "We are near the edge of the forest here. I'm sure it was nothing. But would you like me to check?"

She paused. Was it her imagination, or was Chood staring at her in the darkness? In the shadows his smile looked more like an evil grin. "Don't trouble yourself," she replied.

"It's no trouble. I was going out anyway." Tash couldn't help but ask, "This late?"

She thought she saw Chood's grin widen.

"I'm afraid so. An errand that will not wait."

"Okay. Well... thanks."

Chood bowed. "Our goal is to serve. Good night."

"Good night," she answered as she stumbled past him and headed back down the hall. She felt his eyes linger on her back. Then she heard a door close as he left the house.

"Relax," she told herself "You'd probably stare at someone, too, if you found them roaming around your house in the middle of the night." Wild animals.

Well, it seemed as good an explanation as any.

You and your feelings are getting out of hand, Tash Arranda, she thought. Maybe Zak's right. Maybe you are looking for problems. If you're not careful, you'll end up as crazy as Bebo.

By the time she reached the door to the guest room, Tash had resolved not to jump to conclusions. Maybe Zak was right. She was too obsessed with the Force. Tash pushed the bedroom door open.

John Whitman

Someone was leaning over Zak's bed.

Chapter Eight

A hand closed over Tash's mouth, stifling her shout. So she bit the hand.

"*Arrggh!*" someone howled in pain, dropping Tash. The cry woke her brother, who sat bolt upright in bed. "Wh-what's going on?"

"Zak, look out!" Tash yelled. The shadowy figure was reaching down for him. Still half-asleep, Zak launched himself out of bed like an uncoiled spring, right past the shadowy figure.

"Run!" Tash yelled.

Even in the gloom, Tash recognized the two huge, square-shaped intruders: Ganks. The one she had bitten was still nursing his wounded hand. For good measure she stomped on his foot, then jumped through the doorway, with Zak close behind her.

"Help! Help!" she called. But there was no one to hear her. Uncle Hoole had gone to perform his mysterious work. Chood had gone on his errand. They were alone in the house.

"We've got to get out of here!" she told Zak, who was just barely awake. He followed her as she threw open the front door and ran outside.

The night air of D'vouran woke Zak up quickly. "What's back there?" he huffed as he ran to catch up with his sister.

"Smada! His thugs!" was all she could get out between gasps as she ran toward the center of town.

That was all Zak needed to know. His legs churned as he caught up to his sister. He didn't bother to look back.

Tash did, but she knew what she would see. The two Ganks were after them. For big, heavy brutes they ran quickly. Although Zak and Tash had already reached the main street of the small village, the two Ganks were gaining on them.

"Help! Help!" she shouted. But it was late at night, and the streets were deserted. A few lights went on in some of the houses, but Tash was afraid to stop. She could hear the heavy footsteps of the Ganks closing in.

She tried to lose them by veering sharply to the right, down a side street. Zak followed her.

Right to a dead end.

The Don't Go Inn loomed up before them. No time to look back now. Without missing a beat, Tash raced up to the door and slapped the Open button.

It was locked.

"Open up!" she yelled, pounding on the door.

"Open up! Help!" Zak added.

Behind them, Tash heard two sudden howls. It sent shivers down her spine. The Ganks must be furious! They would tear her apart once they caught up. The cries were cut off sharply, but Tash was pounding the door so hard that she didn't notice.

"Open up! Please!" she begged. She expected any moment to feel the Gank's heavy hand on her throat, or feel the bite of a blaster bolt in her back. "Help!"

Finally the door flew open. A few startled settlers stumbled out, bleary- eyed and in bedclothes. "What's going on here?" one of them demanded.

"They're after us! Help!" Tash pleaded.

"Who's after you?" the settlers demanded.

"Them!" Tash said, pointing back down the street.

But no one was there.

Chapter Nine

Zak and Tash sat in the common room of Chood's home, where they had been sitting for almost an hour. It was still late at night, and Zak was nodding off in his seat. Even Tash yawned-the adrenaline that had pumped through her was long gone.

Hoole had returned—*from where?* Tash wondered-to find the village in an uproar. The whole town had been awakened by Tash and Zak's cries, only to find the story they heard as believable as one of Bebo's delusions.

Uncle Hoole had just finished apologizing to most of the settlers in the village, and to all of the Enzeen. Finally he sat down in front of Zak and Tash. His Shi'ido face was wrinkled into a tired frown.

"You two have managed to make us the most unpopular people in the village."

Tash, of course, had told him her story. There were Ganks. They had been chased. She had run up to the Don't Go Inn and pounded on the door. The next thing she knew, the Ganks had vanished.

"There were no Ganks," Hoole said. "You were having a dream."

"They were there!" Tash insisted. "They must have stopped chasing us when we yelled."

Hoole shook his head. "I checked. There weren't even any footprints. It was a dead-end street. Where would they have gone?"

"I don't know!"

"Tash." Hoole studied her closely. "The settlers at the Don't Go Inn said they saw only you and Zak screaming as though the entire planet was coming apart. No one else saw these Ganks."

"Zak did, didn't you, Zak?" She looked to her brother for support.

"Urn... yeah. I guess."

"You guess?" Uncle Hoole interrogated.

Zak looked down. He wanted to help his sister, but... "Well, I was kind of asleep. I heard Tash yell `Run!' so I ran. I mean, I think I saw something. I saw shadows. It was dark. I was sleeping. But there was probably something there."

Hoole shook his head. "Probably? Zak, look at it this way. Let's say Tash's story is the hyperdrive engine on a starship. And let's say what you saw is the motivator circuit. Now, if the engine is good, you connect the circuit and go to lightspeed. But if it's bad, the minute you plug in your circuit, the whole ship explodes. So you have to be sure." Hoole asked again. "Now, are you going to plug into that circuit?"

Zak hesitated, but only because he felt guilty. He struggled for something to say. "I'm sorry, Tash. I just... I was too sleepy. I didn't actually *see* anything."

"Zak!" Tash was almost in tears.

"Please don't cry, Tash," Hoole said. "No one is blaming you for anything. You just had a nightmare."

"It was real. I bit his nasty Gank finger!"

"You *dreamed* that you bit someone. It seemed so real that it made you walk-or rather, run-in your sleep. These things happen."

"*No*," she insisted stubbornly. "I was awake. I saw them. Why don't we find that Hutt and make him admit that he sent his

thugs after us! Then ask him where they are now. He'll tell you they disappeared."

Hoole considered the option seriously. "That would be difficult. Smada has a small fortress just inside the forest. If we went there, I suspect we would not come out again. And I doubt Smada would confess to kidnapping just because we asked him."

Hoole sighed. "Actually, I blame myself. I know how hard things must be for you since... the tragedy. I thought this interest in the Jedi would take your mind off your sadness. But now your imagination is running wild with this Jedi obsession. It's got to stop. First you upset the

Lightrunner's navicomputer. Then Chood tells me you were wandering around in the middle of the night, and now these dreams." The Shi'ido put one hand on Tash's shoulder. The gesture was clumsy, but she knew he meant well. "Tash, you just have to understand that not everything in the galaxy is a great mystery. Some things are just what they appear to be. You don't need to wonder about the Force every time the wind blows. Do you understand?"

Tash looked up at the ceiling, then down at the dirt floor. Did she understand? She wasn't sure. Life was so confusing! Should she trust her feelings, or her common sense? Her feelings told her that she was in danger, that everyone was in danger. But her common sense told her that there was nothing out there to be afraid of, except a madman's stories and her own imagination. Besides Smada the Hutt, D'vouran appeared to be a peaceful planet.

Maybe she *was* looking too hard for mysteries in everything. Ever since her parents had died, she had felt angry. She didn't know who she was angry at, but she knew the feeling was real. Maybe this feeling of dread was just an excuse to be angry at *something*.

Her uncle waited for her to speak. Finally she said,

"All right, Uncle Hoole. You may be right. Maybe no one did disappear. But you'd better promise me one thing. You and Zak better not vanish."

Hoole almost cracked a smile. "I promise."

The sun rose early the next morning, and Zak Arranda rose with it. He couldn't sleep. Across the bedroom, Tash had finally crashed. After Hoole had talked with them, they'd gone back to bed. Even Hoole had gone to bed then, sleeping on a small cot in Chood's living room. But in their room, Zak had heard his sister lie awake, tossing and turning.

Zak wondered if he'd done the right thing. Had he told the truth or not? He just wasn't sure. And if there's one thing Zak hated, it was doubt. That's why he liked engines, circuits, and physics. When you were building an engine or charting a hyperspace course, you were either right or wrong. There weren't any gray areas. It didn't matter what you were *feeling*. You just double- checked your math and had your answer. If you were wrong, you tried again.

All this talk of shadows, sleep, and dreams made him nervous. He needed to do something. He wasn't like Tash, who could sit and think about a problem forever until she came up with an answer. Zak did his best thinking when he was on the move.

That's why he left Chood's house early the next morning and went out onto the deserted streets of the village, carrying his skimboard.

The morning air was warm, fresh, and scented by the forest that surrounded the town. Zak understood why people had accepted the Enzeen's invitation to settle on D'vouran. It was beautiful.

Zak slid his skimboard out of its carrying case. Before starting the board's microengines, Zak put on his crash helmet, elbow pads, and knee pads. After all, as he had told Deevee a dozen times, he was a daredevil, but he wasn't stupid. Once he was padded up, Zak checked the stick-strips on the top of the board to make sure they were sticky enough to keep him in place.

The skimboard had many high-tech devices, but the most important were the lines of goo called stick-strips. Skimboard riders on Zak's home planet of Alderaan had been nicknamed slashers because of the stunts they pulled by "slashing" through the air, turning flips, and especially going vertical. That meant using the board's built-in anticollision system to fly toward a wall at top speed and then bank straight up. The slasher would be held in place only by the stick-strips that kept his feet connected to the board. Most slashers could get a two-or three-meter vertical ride before gravity caught up and pulled the board into its upright position. The all-time record for a vertical ride was five meters.

Zak planned to break it.

He laid the board on the ground and stepped onto it. The foot controls were near the back. Zak bent his knees for balance, then with a practiced swipe of his toe, he activated the repulsor lift.

His stomach dropped as the board sprang high into the air. Zak almost lost his balance, and the board wobbled beneath him, but he quickly righted himself.

Chewbacca's rewiring had worked well. Maybe *too* well. The skimboard was designed to hover an arm's length above the ground. Zak had wanted it to go a little higher, but now he found himself floating higher than even a Wookiee could reach. A fall from that height was not going to be fun. But Zak had no intention of letting that stop him. He had a vertical ride record to break.

Propelling himself forward, Zak skimmed through the air until he reached the Don't Go Inn. It was two stories tall. Even with the extra altitude of Zak's skimboard, the roof was at least six meters above his head. With a good run to gather speed, Zak and his souped-up board should be able to bank up the wall and get over the top with momentum to spare.

Tapping the accelerator, Zak leaned into a turn and skimmed away from the hotel, then whipped around and hovered. He had

a twenty-meter runway straight to the white siding of the hotel. That should do it.

Taking a deep breath, he tapped the accelerator into full. The hot-wired skimboard rapidly picked up speed.

Under his helmet, he heard wind rush past his ears in a muffled moan, and he had to squint his eyes so they wouldn't tear. The white wall rushed toward him.

Fifteen meters.

Some slashers had a reputation for being lazy, unambitious delinquents. In Zak's case it wasn't true. You had to be brave and very ambitious to try a vertical ride. Even with the anticollision system, it took real courage to stay calm while you hurtled at high speed toward a solid wall.

Ten meters.

Zak kept his mind on his next move. The real trick to a vertical climb wasn't getting the nose up-the skimboard did most of the work for you. It was the moment afterward. Once the board banked, its nose was pointing straight up into the air. That meant the bottom-side repulsors were pushing off the wall. Unless the rider kept his balance perfectly, and cut power to the bottom repulsors at just the right moment, the board would push off the wall, flipping the rider over and dropping him straight into the ground.

Five meters.

Zak braced himself.

One meter.

Now!

Zak leaned back as the anticollision kicked in. The nose of the skimboard tilted up and Zak tilted with it. Suddenly he was looking up at the sky. Using the foot controls, he transferred power from the bottom repulsors to the rear engine, trying to gain altitude.

But he forgot to compensate for the skimboard's newly improved engine. The same thrusters that had pushed him off the ground were now pushing him *away* from the wall. Zak and

his board tipped over backward. He was no longer looking at the sky, he was looking at the town-which was upside down. Or rather, *he* was. Then gravity, aided by the power of his own upsidedown repulsors, drove him right into the ground with a thud.

He was very glad that he had worn his helmet.

Even so, he felt like his brain had exploded inside his head. He lay flat on his back for a moment, staring at the sky. It felt as though his entire body had just become one big bruise, and he decided he couldn't possibly feel any worse.

Until his view of the sky was blocked by the blubbery body of Smada the Hutt.

"How convenient," Smada said. "We were just coming to kill you."

Chapter Ten

Zak scrambled to his feet. But he was already surrounded by five Ganks. Smada the Hutt sat on his hoversled amid folds of fat flesh. The grinning slug stuck one hand into a large glass bowl filled with live eels. He dropped one of the wriggling eels into his mouth and licked his lips.

"Delicious. Now, where was I?" the Hutt rumbled. "Oh, yes. Boys."

The Ganks raised their weapons.

"Wait!" Zak cried. "Why are you doing this?"

"Blame your uncle," the crime lord said matter-of-factly. "He won't cooperate, so I've decided to *convince* him to work for me. I'm going to kidnap your sister, and kill you as a warning that I mean business."

"People will wake up soon, boss," one of the Ganks growled. "Lots of witnesses."

"You're right. Kill the boy and dump his body on the doorstep. Then we'll find the girl."

"Doomed!" Someone shrieked the word so loudly that even the Gank killers jumped back.

"Doomed!" the voice shrieked again.

Bebo appeared around a corner, shuffling through the center of town. He swayed this way and that and screamed at the top of his lungs. "We're all doomed!"

"That madman no longer amuses me," Smada bellowed. "Turn him into nerf meat."

One of the Ganks pointed his blaster at Bebo and fired. The blaster bolt streaked through the air straight toward Bebo. But then it missed. Zak blinked. He must have hit his head harder than he thought. He could have sworn that the blaster bolt veered away at the last minute.

"You missed!" one of the other Ganks laughed. "But I won't."

He fired one shot. Then a second. Both shots missed and shattered the side of a building far down the street. Bebo, shocked but unhurt, ran for cover.

All the Ganks lost their tempers. Five blasters fired at once, and the air was filled with the scream of energy bolts. Bebo was lost behind a cloud of dust and smoke.

When it cleared, Bebo lay cowering on the ground. But he was untouched.

"You cursed old fool!" Smada roared. "I'll kill you myself!"

"You'll kill no one, Smada." It was Hoole's voice.

Smada and his bodyguards turned. Behind them, Hoole stood at the head of two dozen villagers, foul-tempered from lack of sleep and all armed with blasters. Tash and Deevee stood behind the Shi'ido.

Smada laughed. He reached one fat hand into the bowl of eels and ate another one. "Hoole, you're a fool. Do you think a few frontier settlers are a match for my Ganks!"

Hoole's voice was like steel. "Do you want to kill that man so badly that you're willing to find out?"

"I am Smada the Hutt! I kill who I want, when I want."

"Not today."

Hoole waited.

A low, angry growl rumbled from deep within Smada's cavernous belly. He was a Hutt. That meant he wasn't afraid of a

few villagers. But it also meant he was smart enough to know when to cut his losses. Winning this standoff wasn't worth the risk to his own precious skin.

"That's twice you've foiled me, Hoole," Smada said. "But in the end, you *will* work for me." The Hutt cast a threatening eye on Bebo. "And you'll be dead before another day is over."

One of the Ganks jumped on board the hoversled and steered it down the street as the rest of the thugs followed. No one dared to stop them. Only when the crime lord was out of sight did the settlers, and Hoole, relax.

"Zak, are you all right?" Tash asked.

"I think so," her brother said. "I've got him to thank for it." He pointed at Bebo.

"Please," Bebo screeched to the gathered crowd. "You've got to listen to me. I've found something!"

But the settlers had had enough excitement for one morning. With a few short thanks from Hoole, they turned and headed back to their houses. "You're all doomed!" Bebo yelled after them.

"What happened?" Tash asked Zak.

Zak shrugged. "I don't know, but it saved my life. It was amazing. Those Ganks kept firing at him, but every single shot missed, and he just stood there. He's pretty brave."

"Or a fool," Deevee added.

"Urn, Tash, I think you may have been right." Zak reddened a little. "At least about Smada's men being after us. He was after me this morning."

"I told you!" she nearly shouted.

"But I don't know anything about the Ganks *disappearing*," he added.

"Disappearing!" Bebo pounced on the word. "Yes, yes! Disappearing!"

Hoole interrupted. "Zak, Tash, please. It is too early in the day for this."

But Tash had finally found someone who believed her, even if he was a madman. "Uncle Hoole, I'd like to stay and talk with him for a while."

Hoole looked around. The Hutt was gone, but for how long? "I don't think that would be safe, Tash."

"Well then you can stay with me. Or Zak."

The Shi'ido shook his head. "I have to go," he said. "Where?"

"I have more business to take care of," the Shi'ido said mysteriously. Again Tash was reminded of what Smada had told her the day before in the cantina. *What was Uncle Hoole up to?*

"And I didn't get much of a chance to practice my skimboarding," her brother explained.

"Just for a few minutes, Uncle Hoole. Please!" she pleaded.

Hoole relented. "Very well. Deevee will stay with you. I will meet you back at Chood's house. Do not go far."

"Prime," Tash muttered as her brother and uncle left. "The dreariest droid ever designed will make great company."

"I can't say I'm any happier than you are," Deevee intoned. "I'd rather be counting the sand fleas on a nerf. Although I could probably find plenty on your new friend here."

Bebo had squatted down in the dust. He rocked back and forth, muttering to himself. When Tash approached him again and put a hand on his shoulder, he did not respond. "Bebo? That's your name, right?" No response. "Are you okay?" No response. "Do you know about these disappearances?"

"Disappearances!" The word brought Bebo to life. "Yes, the disappearances! You know."

"What can you tell me?"

"Let me show you what I found!" He leaped to his feet and grabbed Tash's hand. "Come on! Hurry!"

He rushed off, pulling Tash along behind him.

"This is beginning to look like an adventure," Deevee grumbled as he hurried after them. "I detest adventures."

Zak decided that his skimboard was a little too powerful. He walked back to the spaceport, where he could use the

Lightrunner's tools. He had watched Chewbacca work, and he was sure he knew what he was doing.

Using one of the *Lightrunner*'s landing pods as a seat, he popped open a panel on his skimboard. He would lower the power just enough so that he'd still have a powerful ride, but without as much height.

He was just about to make the adjustment when a shadow fell across him.

A moment later, Zak was gone.

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Bebo led Tash away from the town and into the surrounding woods. It was a dark forest, where trees grew thick and very close together. Their trunks were gnarled, with big roots that broke out of the ground. They reminded Tash of tentacles.

"Um, should we really be out here?" she asked. She looked back, but Deevee had been left far behind.

Bebo didn't answer. Instead he led her even deeper into the forest, until they came to the base of an enormous tree. Giant roots curled up as high as Tash's head, and the branches were so thick that she could not see the sun. Beneath the tree, it was almost as dark as night. In the shadow of one of the great roots, Tash could just make out an opening in the ground.

"Down there," Bebo said, pointing toward the hole. "Go on."

"Down there?" she asked. "Are you sure it's safe?"

"Safe? Safe! Heh, heh, heh!" Bebo cackled. "If you wanted to be safe, you shouldn't have come to D'vouran! "

And he shoved her down the hole.

Chapter Eleven

Tash started to scream, but the fall was so short that her cry came out as a short "Yip!" as she landed on something as soft as a large cushion. Wherever she was, it was pitch black.

Tash had just enough sense to get out of the way before she heard Bebo drop down after her, still muttering and chuckling softly to himself.

"What are you doing! Why did you push me?" she yelled angrily.

"Sorry, sorry. Have to hurry, though. No time to waste."

She heard Bebo shuffle away into the darkness. "Don't leave me here! Where are you?"

But he didn't go far. Tash heard the creak of a lever being turned, and then light flooded the room.

She was standing in the middle of an underground laboratory. Or at least what used to be an underground laboratory. Vials and test tubes lay scattered on tabletops, and broken glass was everywhere. There was lots of computer equipment, too, but most of it was broken or taken apart.

Over in a corner, a dirty sleeping mat was unrolled, and bits and pieces of junk were gathered around it. Propped up on a little shelf, Tash noticed a few holographic pictures meant as keepsakes. All of them were of the same attractive woman. In the

last holograph, the woman wore camping gear and looked like she'd been in the wild for months. In the background, Tash recognized the trees of D'vouran.

"Lonni," Bebo said.

"This is your friend Lonni?" Tash asked. "Then she does exist."

"Did exist. Did exist," Bebo mumbled. "Gone. Vanished." He heaved a long, sad sigh. "Come with me!"

Tash followed Bebo down a flight of stairs that led deeper underground. "We found the laboratory soon after the crash. The Imperials came after me. They wanted to arrest me."

"They blamed you for the crash," Tash said. "I read it on the HoloNet."

"They blamed me, but it wasn't my fault. D'vouran wasn't on the charts! It wasn't my fault!"

"I believe you," Tash said, although the truth was she wasn't sure what to believe.

In all the excitement, Tash seemed to have shaken the feeling that she was being watched. Though now, as she descended beneath the surface of D'vouran, the feeling came back stronger than ever. Whatever it was, she was drawing close to its source.

At the bottom of the stairs was a cavernous underground chamber, large enough to house a dozen star freighters. The steel walls were lined with more decrepit scientific equipment, and in the center of the room was a vast pit. It must have measured twenty meters across. It led down even deeper into the planet... so deep that Tash could not see the bottom. The hair on the back of her neck rose.

Whatever was in the pit was pure evil.

"What is this place?" she whispered.

Bebo whispered, too. "We only found the top chamber at first. I didn't uncover these stairs until recently. This place must have been here before we came."

There was a winch and a crane attached to the side of the pit. Obviously, at some point, things-maybe even people-must have

been lowered into the pit by whoever ran the laboratory. Tash couldn't imagine who would have the courage to go down there. She peeked over the edge of the pit and shuddered. There was nothing there, but the feeling of overwhelming dread was so powerful, it made her dizzy. Yet, at the same time, it triggered something else inside her, a powerful and comforting force that seemed to fight against her fear and give her strength. But the feeling of terror grew stronger. Whatever was making people disappear, it had started here. She was sure of it.

"Maybe the Enzeen built it," she suggested. "Maybe. But what's that?" Bebo pointed at markings on the wall. Tash gasped.

Carved into the wall was the insignia of the Empire, old and worn but unmistakable.

Everyone in the galaxy recognized that symbol. It looked like a wheel within a wheel-like a star inside a black circle. But everything about it was rigid and mechanical, as though declaring that even the stars obeyed the Emperor.

Tash was jolted by a sudden roar. Her heart stopped and she scurried away from the pit, thinking that whatever lay down there was coming up. Bebo squealed and cowered, covering his ears as a second roar echoed through the underground laboratory. Tash frantically looked around for the source of the terrible noise.

And saw Deevee standing at the bottom of the stairs.

"Deevee!" she cried. "Did you do that?"

The droid stepped between Tash and Bebo. "Don't worry, Tash. I am fully capable of protecting you."

"Protect me? From what'?"

"From this madman," the droid said. He glared at Bebo, who still lay trembling on the floor, his hands covering his ears. "He tried to kidnap you. Luckily I am equipped with infrared sensors and was able to follow you through the forest."

Tash couldn't help but smile. This was a side of the droid that she'd never seen before. "Why D-V9, you actually came to my rescue!"

The droid seemed to straighten a little. "That is my job.

"I thought you hated taking care of us," Tash pointed out. "Maybe you decided we're not so bad after all, hmm?"

Deevee sniffed. "Nonsense. I just try to do a good job, whatever it is." He looked at Bebo. "I take it, then, that you are in no danger?"

"Not from him. What was that sound you made?"

Deevee pointed at his mouth-the tiny speaker on the front of his face. "Part of my job as a research unit is-was, I should say-to record sounds that I hear. Once, on a visit to the planet Tatooine, I heard a krayt dragon. I thought it might come in useful."

Tash coaxed Bebo out of his shock while Deevee examined the room. "This equipment is in poor shape," he observed, "but it is very complicated machinery. Whoever built this must have been working on a highly advanced experiment."

"What do you think they were doing?" Tash asked.

"I cannot say," the droid replied, examining an old computer terminal. "Most of the equipment is gone, and the computer files have been destroyed. But it was something important. Master Hoole will want to know about this immediately."

Tash turned sharply. "He will? Why? Deevee, what is Uncle Hoole up to? Why did Smada the Hutt say there's a lot about our uncle that we don't know?"

"I could not tell you," Deevee replied quickly

"Couldn't?" Tash accused. "Or won't?"

Bebo piped up. "Don't argue! There's no time. Don't you see?"

"No, I do not," Deevee answered. "I see nothing but an old hermit, half out of his mind, who lives in an abandoned laboratory. And if people have been disappearing for so long, why haven't you gone with them?"

In answer Bebo removed a small pendant from around his neck. "Look! Look!" he urged.

Taking the pendant, Tash saw that it was a tiny device encased in crystal.

"What is it?" she asked.

"This," Bebo said, "is protection."

"From what?" Deevee asked.

"I don't know," the madman replied. "The technology is too advanced for me, but I think it makes some kind of energy field. I found it here in the laboratory and kept it to study later. Ever since then, I've been safe from whatever is causing people to disappear."

Deevee was skeptical. "Which is what?"

"I wish I knew!" Bebo said.

"Then how do you know you're safe?" Deevee scoffed.

"Because I'm still here," Bebo rasped. "I have not disappeared. Others have. Many others."

Many others? Tash wondered. "What do you mean? Tell me what happened."

Bebo sighed. Finally he said, "D'vouran wasn't on the charts. We crashed. Twenty of us survived, including Lonni and me. We sent out a distress signal and waited. But we were fine. The Enzeen had welcomed us. They treated us well, and they fed us." His eyes grew distant. He was remembering something terrible. "Then people started disappearing. At first, just one or two. We thought they'd gotten lost in the forest. Then another, and another. Then in groups of two or three! They just disappeared!"

He shuddered in fright. "We didn't know what to do. We searched for them but never found a trace. Instead, the last few of us found this place. We stayed here. As long as we were here, no one disappeared. But we had to check the distress beacon. And every person who went out, never came back."

"What about the Enzeen?" Tash asked. "Couldn't they help?"

Bebo twitched. "I don't trust them." He continued. "Finally only Lonni and I were left. The Enzeen told us that the Empire had investigated the crash and blamed me. I had to hide here. It was the only safe place. Then when I heard that settlers were coming to D'vouran, I had to warn them. I had to tell them about the disappearing!"

His shoulders slumped. "But they won't listen. I didn't have any proof. Not until now."

Although they were alone, Bebo's voice had become a whisper.

Deevee examined the pendant. "There is some kind of circuit inside," the droid announced. "It appears to be a kind of tiny energy generator. I'd say it creates a small force field, like the starship shielding used to deflect blasters. But this one is much smaller. And it's been tuned to a very unusual frequency. I'm not sure what it's for. However, it does match the design of the equipment around us."

Tash concluded: "So whatever it is, this pendant was left by the same people who built this place. The Empire. Maybe Bebo's right, Deevee. Maybe people *are* disappearing. And I bet this laboratory has something to do with it. You're right, Deevee, we should tell Uncle Hoole."

Tash and Deevee wanted to return to the village, but Bebo wouldn't follow. "Stay here!" he pleaded. "It's not safe outside. That's how people vanish. That's how everyone goes. In here, it's safe."

"I'm sorry, Bebo. I have to go."

"Then take this." He put the pendant back into her hand. "It will protect you out there."

Tash tried to refuse. "I can't take it, Bebo. It's yours."

"Take it!" Bebo insisted. "They think I'm mad with guilt. Maybe they're right. But you believe me. So you must convince them. There is a danger!"

Tash slipped the pendant over her head and hid it under her shirt. "Thank you."

"We've been gone too long, Tash," Deevee urged. "I must report to Master Hoole."

Tash suddenly realized that Uncle Hoole and Zak were in danger. They were out there on the planet, without the protection of a device like the one Bebo had given her. They had to hurry. "Thanks, Bebo," Tash said to the man. "I still don't

know what's going on here, but at least I do know there's a bigger mystery than Smada the Hutt."

Tash and Deevee climbed out of the laboratory and hurried through the shadows under the trees.

Back in the laboratory, Bebo huddled near the edge of the terrible pit. He was afraid of it, but he knew that somehow it was the cause of all the evil he had seen. Now, at last, someone else believed him.

There was a rumble from deep within the dark abyss. The rumble became a groan.

Bebo leaned over the edge of the pit. For just a moment he thought he saw something moving down there.

But he did not see the Gank killer creep up behind him until it was too late.

"This is from Smada the Hutt," the Gank snarled, raising his blaster. "It's your turn to disappear." He fired. The bolt struck Bebo and sent him tumbling into the pit.

Halfway back to the village, Tash asked Deevee, "Do you think Uncle Hoole will believe me now?"

"I cannot say," the droid replied. "There is certainly a laboratory here, but what does that mean? It was abandoned long ago. If there is foul play about, I'd say it has far more to do with Smada the Hutt than with an abandoned laboratory. He is the real danger on this planet."

But Tash had stopped listening. Another sound had reached her ears.

Slurp-Slurp.

The same sound she had heard last night. "Do you hear that?"

Slurp-Slurp.

"Yes," the droid replied. "A most unusual sound. Not unlike the bloodsucking leeches of Circarpous Four——"

"It's coming from over there."

With Deevee close behind, Tash crept toward the sound.

Slurp-Slurp. Slurp-Slurp.

Not only did the sound grow louder, but it multiplied many times.

And it was coming from just beyond the next tree.

Tash cautiously pulled a branch out of the way and peered into a small clearing. At first she was relieved. All she saw were a few Enzeen standing around the clearing. As Tash watched, she saw another Enzeen step into the clearing. It was Chood.

Tash opened her mouth to call out to him. Then she gagged.

Chood opened his own grinning mouth and stuck out his tongue. It was surprisingly thick, and incredibly long, and wriggled out of his mouth like a long, thick snake. It squirmed in the air for a moment, then plunged deep into the ground.

Slurp-Slurp.

Chapter Twelve

Slurp-Slurp.

The sucking sound filled the air.

What was Chood doing?

Tash pulled the tree branch even farther back to get a better look. But the branch snapped with a loud crack. The startled Enzeen looked right at her.

She saw Chood's face clearly. The friendly smile fell away, revealing a hate-filled glare. "She has seen us. Get her!"

The group of Enzeen started toward them. Tash was confused. Why were they angry?

"Run!" Deevee yelled, pulling Tash away from the clearing.

For the second time in two days, Tash was running for her life.

Tash and Deevee rushed away from the small clearing. But the Enzeen were much too fast. They came up quickly from behind, and Tash could see them slipping through the trees on either side. Soon they would be surrounded. Beside her, Deevee's mechanical joints whined as he tried to keep up with his human companion. He was not designed for sprints through the woods. Tash leaped over a tree root. Behind her, Deevee tripped and fell clattering to the ground. The Enzeen were on him instantly. "Deevee!" Tash yelled, slowing down.

"Run!" the droid cried out. Then he was buried beneath a pile of Enzeen.

Tash heard them pounding mercilessly on his metal body. As she ran, she looked back over her shoulder, hoping to catch a glimpse of the droid.

When she looked forward again, an Enzeen was standing in front of her.

Tash dodged to the left. But there was another, and another. Everywhere she looked, there were Enzeen. She was surrounded.

She struggled, kicking and punching as the Enzeen grabbed hold of her. But there were too many of them. "What's going on?" she demanded. "Why are you making people disappear?"

One of the Enzeen laughed an evil laugh. "We have harmed no one."

"Then what's going on here?" Tash demanded.

The Enzeen laughed again. "You will never know." He looked at his companions. "Chood will catch up in a moment. We'll hold her until then. -

Tash gave up struggling. The Enzeen were too strong for her. She started to tremble as the feeling of dread began to overwhelm her. And yet, as it had in the laboratory, her fear sparked another feeling, a sense of peace and calm, powerful, like some kind of force.

The Force.

Tash had searched for it. Hoped for it. Longed for it. But she never actually thought she had it. But she felt something. Didn't she?

"You've got nothing to lose," she told herself.

Tash closed her eyes. She tried to call on the Force. Taking a deep breath, she remembered what the Jedi had written about the Force. *The Force surrounds us, she had read, it binds us together. It can draw objects to us, or push them away. It is the most powerful force in all the galaxy. The strength of armies, of starfleets, even the strength of planets, is nothing compared to the power of the Force.*

Tash imagined the Force as a field of energy pushing the Enzeen back. At first she felt foolish. But slowly her embarrassment gave way to calm. She forgot about her fear. A warm tingle spread through her body. She imagined the energy field expanding, driving the shrieking creatures farther and farther away. As she did, the tingle in her body grew into a strong electric current, running from the top of her head down to her toes. For just an instant she felt a sense of connection with something larger than herself, larger even than the planet on which she stood.

That's when the ground began to move.

It started as a low rumble. The ground started to tremble beneath their feet. In seconds the rumble became a roar, and the trembling turned into a full-fledged groundquake. The Enzeen shouted in surprise. Trees started to creak, and a few of them snapped and crashed to the ground. Tash was thrown off her feet, coughing as the groundquake kicked up clouds of dust and dried leaves. The sun seemed to vanish as the sky grew dark. Somewhere in the distance Tash heard the loudest sound she would ever hear, a sound like two mountains grinding together. The grinding, booming explosion seemed to come from above and below. Later, thinking back, Tash imagined that if a planet could speak, it would speak in a voice that loud.

The quake ended even faster than it had begun. There was a final boom, like a giant door closing, and then the terrible noise just stopped. Tree branches, shaken by the quake, continued to vibrate for a few seconds. Then there was silence. Only the gloom remained. The day seemed to have gone from midmorning to late afternoon in a few seconds. It was as though the ground- quake had caused the planet to spin closer toward night.

Did I do that? she wondered in awe.

The groundquake had surprised the Enzeen as much as it surprised Tash. They, too, had fallen to the ground. Tash saw her chance.

She ran.

This time she didn't look back. She ran as fast as she could, ignoring the branches and twigs that scratched her. If she could just reach the village, Hoole and the settlers would help her.

Tash did not hear anyone following her. The Enzeen had been too startled by the tremors to chase her. She knew that wouldn't last, so she kept running. She wouldn't stop until she was safe.

She saw the buildings of the village through the trees. Her heart leaped! She was going to make it! She was going to be safe!

Tash broke through the trees into the village, shouting, "Uncle Hoole, Uncle Hoole! Zak! Anybody!" No one answered.

She shouted it again and again, running from door to door. She ran down the main street. She ran to the spaceport. She ran to the Don't Go Inn.

But the village was completely deserted.

Chapter Thirteen

She was all alone.

Somehow every person in the village had vanished. Uncle Hoole was gone. Zak was gone. Even Deevee was gone. Tash's worst nightmare had come true. She had been abandoned.

She knew the Enzeen would find her soon. She didn't care. Her entire family was gone. Her poor parents had been vaporized in the destruction of Alderaan. Now Hoole and Zak had vanished, along with a village full of settlers.

Then an even more terrible thought struck her. Had she caused it?

She had tried to call on the Force. Instead a ground-quake had erupted. Had the groundquake swallowed the villagers-and Hoole and Zak? And had she created the groundquake with the Force?

The thought pressed down upon her like the weight of a planet.

Weak and defeated, Tash walked to the spaceport. All the ships were still there. No one had *flown* off the planet. But they were still gone.

Tash stopped in front of the *Lightrunner*. Briefly she considered trying to fly it away, to escape from the Enzeen. But she knew she couldn't do it. She could only pretend to be a pilot. She couldn't really fly a starship.

Dragging her feet, Tash stubbed her toe on something. It was a flat board about a meter and a half long, with stick-strips across the top and thruster vents on the back.

Zak's skimboard.

What was it doing here?

Next to it, Tash noticed a shattered glass bowl... and amid the broken glass were three or four small, slimy bodies. Eels. A bowl full of eels.

Smada the Hutt had been there. And so had Zak.

Tash tried to steady her beating heart. Maybe Zak hadn't vanished. Maybe he had been kidnapped by Smada. Maybe Zak was right. Smada was behind all the disappearances.

But then what about the Enzeen? What were they? And why had they wanted to kill her?

Tash felt questions ricochet around in her head like blaster bolts. She didn't know the answers. She only knew one thing, and that was that it appeared that her brother had been captured by Smada.

Which meant he might still be alive.

Tash tucked the skimboard under her arm and left the spaceport. She headed through the village looking for Smada's stronghold.

She did not notice something creeping slowly behind her.

Smada's stronghold was not difficult to find. As her uncle had told her, it lay just inside the forest on the far side of the village. Two towers of ugly brown stone rose up out of the trees. From a distance they looked like misshapen giants. By Hutt standards it was a small place, more like a summer cabin than a fortress, but to Tash it looked like a mansion.

It was nearly dark by the time Tash arrived there. Again she wondered what had happened to the day. Was it just later than she thought? But, no, she had only been awake for a few hours. Yet the day was all but gone.

She walked right up to the front door and knocked.

The Ganks let her in. They searched her thoroughly and made her leave the skimboard beside the door. Beyond the door was a large audience hall, just big enough to fit a Hutt's ego. There were six Gank bodyguards in the room. Smada the Hutt lolled atop his hoversled, chuckling to himself. In one corner, in a small cage, sat her brother.

"Tash!" he called out.

"Welcome," Smada said. "I've been expecting you."

"Let my brother go," Tash demanded.

The Ganks laughed.

"Certainly," Smada said. "As soon as you tell me where Hoole is."

Tash was stunned. "I don't know where he is. I thought *you* had captured him."

"Me?" the Hutt replied. "Don't be a fool, girl. If I had your uncle already, I wouldn't bother with you and your brother. You two are meaningless, but Hoole's Shi'ido powers will make me millions!"

"Your millions won't mean anything if you're dead," she said defiantly. "Do you have any idea what's going on around here? Didn't you feel the groundquake?"

Smada shrugged. "A tremor. Nothing significant."

"Have you been to the village? Everyone's gone!"

Smada sniffed. "As I said, nothing significant. Those villagers don't concern me. I wouldn't care if the ground opened up and swallowed them all. As long as I get my Shi'ido."

Tash tried again to convince him. "You're in as much danger as we are, Smada. People are disappearing. And the Enzeen are evil. They tried to kill me."

Smada laughed. "*I* will kill you, if you don't tell me where your uncle is. No, wait, I have a better idea."

He motioned to one of his Gank bodyguards. The enormous Gank plucked Zak out of his cage and dragged him to Smada's hoversled. "Let go of me, you ugly——"

"Silence," Smada growled threateningly. Zak glared at him but said nothing.

Pointing his blaster at Zak, Smada turned to Tash. "Tell me where your uncle is, or I will kill your brother."

Chapter Fourteen

Tash didn't know what to say. How could she save Zak when she didn't know the answer to Smada's question? But she had to say something.

Tash opened her mouth to speak. And as she did an enormous roar blasted through the chamber, echoing off the walls and deafening them all. Smada dropped his blaster and tried to cover his ears with his flabby hands. Even the ruthless Ganks shrieked and covered their ears. It was like nothing they had ever heard.

Except Tash, who recognized it.

It was the sound of a krayt dragon roaring.

Deevee stood in the doorway. He was battered and dented, but he was functioning. "Catch!" he called out, and slid something toward them.

It was Zak's skimboard. It clattered along the floor until Tash stopped it with one foot. "Zak, come on!" She stepped on board and felt the stick- strips cling to her feet. Zak was still a little disoriented, but he managed to hop on board as well. "Brace yourself," he warned.

He activated the repulsors, and Tash felt her stomach drop out. They were suddenly floating three meters in the air. "C-can't you fly any lower?"

Zak actually laughed. "Nope. This is the *lowest* setting."

"Get them!" Smada roared. The Hutt and his bodyguards had recovered quickly from the shock of the dragon roar, but they were startled again to see their two prisoners suddenly floating so high off the ground.

"Blast them!"

The Ganks opened fire.

Zak and Tash saw white-hot energy beams flash around them. They heard blaster fire sizzle the air, and they smelled the acrid odor of ion burn.

But not a single shot touched them. "These guys are lousy shots!" Zak laughed.

Tash remembered the gangsters' attack on Bebo. "It's not them, Zak. It's this!" She pulled out the pendant she still wore. "This is what Bebo was wearing. It protected him from disappearing. And I think it protected him from the blasters!"

But there was no time to examine the device. The blaster bolts were missing them, but they came awfully close. Zak kicked the skimboard into gear and slashed toward the exit, where Deevee waited. Some of the Ganks continued to fire, while others leaped up, trying to grab them out of the sky. Zak twisted and turned the skimboard to dodge them.

"We have to get Deevee!" Tash said. "Are you sure this thing will lift all three of us?" she asked.

"Are you kidding?" Zak replied. "The way it's supercharged, it could carry a Hutt! But there isn't *room* for three people on board."

Tash yelled down to Deevee. "Grab hold of the bottom!"

Now that they were closer, Tash could see how badly damaged the droid was. Wiring was exposed where his silver covering had been torn away. Every inch of his body had been dented.

With a tremendous leap, the damaged droid launched himself upward and grabbed hold of the skimboard. He was hanging on

the underside of the hoverboard, and the repulsors blasted him, but he held on.

"Can you make it, Deevee?" Tash called out.

"I don't seem to have much choice!" the droid replied. "Go!"

Zak hit the accelerator, and they zoomed out the open door. They were going to escape!

"You're all useless fools!" Smada the Hutt snarled at his Gank bodyguards.

He had not become a crime lord through ruthlessness alone-he had a brilliant and devious mind. He knew it was impossible that all his Gank bodyguards were missing their targets.

Smada picked up his blaster and took careful aim at the receding skimboard. He squeezed the trigger twice.

The high-velocity energy bolts covered the distance in an eye-blink. The first shot passed right over Deevee's head and between his arms. The second shot creased the skimboard's underside, cutting off the propulsion that kept the board aloft. The microengines whined once, then the skimboard bucked wildly and dropped.

"Look out!" Tash cried. The hoverboard disappeared from beneath her feet and she was falling through the darkness. The ground rushed up to meet her and she struck it hard.

The wind had been knocked out of her, and she gasped. Next to her, she heard Zak suddenly shriek, "Help! Help!" Instinctively she grabbed for him and touched his arm. Instantly his shrieking stopped.

"What's wrong?" she yelled.

"I-I don't know," her brother said in utter confusion. "I felt something grab me. Then when you touched me, it stopped."

"Did you see it?"

"Tash, I can barely see you! It's pitch black out here."

It was true. Night had fallen. Which was impossible... unless the planet had begun to spin faster in space.

Tash stood up, and immediately Zak screamed again. Tash felt his hand clutch desperately at her. "Don't let go! Don't let go of me again!" he whimpered.

The fear in his voice terrified her. "What is it?"

Zak the daredevil, Zak the risk taker, was trembling with fright. "I don't know. I don't want to know. But it's strong. And it will get me if you let go!"

Chapter Fifteen

"Deevee, can you see anything?" Tash asked. "Use your infrared."

"It's not functioning," the droid replied. "Most of my systems are offline, thanks to that beating the Enzeen gave me. Thank goodness they left me for scrap before the job was done!"

"The Enzeen?" Zak asked, bewildered. "They attacked you?"

Tash quickly told her brother about the laboratory. The groundquake. The empty village. And that Hoole was missing.

Zak's voice was trembling as he said, "Great. What do we do? Smada's behind us somewhere. The Enzeen are trying to kill you. Uncle Hoole's gone. And there's something in this darkness that's after us!"

"Is the skimboard working?" Tash asked.

Deevee had a tiny glowrod hooked into his photoreceptors, still functioning, which he lit for Zak. In the small beam of light, Zak examined his board. A long black scar ran across the board's main repulsor vent. The sharp smell of ozone lingered where Smada's shot had struck. "It's not going anywhere now. The micro-alluvial damper's shot. But I think I can fix it if I get a minute to rewire it."

"We'd better make a run for it then. Deevee, can you run?"

"No," the droid said matter-of-factly. "You'll have to leave me behind."

"Not this time," Tash said. She put one arm around his waist. Zak assumed a similar position on the droid's other side.

"Which way?" Zak asked.

"Toward the spaceport. Maybe together we can fly the *Lightrunner* out of here."

"I think not." A bright beam of light fell across them. Smada and his men had found them already.

The Hutt sat atop his hoversled, with his six Ganks around him. He glared at Zak and Tash through narrow slits. "Bring them here."

One of the Ganks lunged forward to grab them.

Then he vanished.

"*Aiiiiiieeeeee!*" A piercing scream sliced the air. "Help! Help me! It's got me! *Aiiiieee——!*" It was suddenly cut off.

Smada shined his searchlight onto the spot where the thug had been. But there was nothing there.

Not even a footprint.

"What is it?" Deevee cried. "What's going on?"

Out of the darkness, Smada answered. His voice was still powerful and commanding, but there was fear in it as well. "Something is out there." He shouted to his guards. "Bring those brats to me and let's get out of here!"

Cautiously another Gank stepped forward, while the others kept their blasters ready. This time Smada kept the searchlight trained on his henchman's back.

And this time they saw it. In the blink of an eye, a hole opened right under his feet and he dropped down. "Help!" the thug screamed.

The Gank threw his arms out wide as he was sucked downward, stopping his fall at his shoulders. He tried to scramble out of the hole, but it snapped shut around him like a jaw closing tight. The ground itself squeezed around his chest and he grunted in pain.

By that time the other Ganks had reached him. They grabbed hold of his hands and arms and tried to pull him out of the hole. But instead something far, far stronger pulled him another inch into the ground.

"*Aaiiiiii!*" the Gank screamed. It was terrifying to hear that sound come from the battle-scarred thug. "It's hurting me! It's hurting me!" His eyes were alive with terror. "I'm being eaten alive!"

Tash and Zak looked on, frozen with terror. "Blast it!" Smada roared.

"Blast what?" his guards shouted back. "There is nothing!"

They watched helplessly as the Gank's head was drawn in, and then the rest of his body, until all that remained was one hand sticking up out of the dirt. Finally the hand, too, disappeared. The hole closed up as if it had never been, and the victim was gone.

For the rest of the bodyguards, it was the last straw. Smada didn't pay them enough for this. They searched for someplace safe. But what place was safe from the ground itself?

Smada's hoversled.

The five remaining Ganks swarmed the floating platform, trying to escape the creature beneath the ground. There wasn't enough room on the crowded sled, and they began to scratch and claw one another like men fighting over the last life pod in a doomed starship.

"Get back, you spice-grubbing muckworms!" the Hutt commanded. He swung his thick tail, sweeping them off his sled.

All but one of the Ganks were dragged screaming into the ground. Each time the hole sealed up as if it had never been. In moments, Smada's henchmen had vanished.

Zak, Tash, and Deevee stood on the ground. The monster seemed uninterested in Deevee. Tash was protected, and Zak was too, as long as he held her hand. Atop the hoversled sat the surviving Gank killer and Smada the Hutt. Smada's massive frame shook with anger.

"WHAT IS THIS!" The roar exploded out of Smada the Hutt like a thunderclap. The mighty Hutt rose up to his full height, balancing himself on the tip of his thick body. Stretched out, Smada stood three meters above the deck of his hoversled, dwarfing even his Gank guard. It was an awesome sight to behold, and his voice boomed powerfully enough to conjure a demon.

Instead it conjured the Enzeen.

They melted out of the forest, twenty of them, all carrying lamps. They walked calmly across the ground, unafraid of whatever it was that had just swallowed up five Ganks.

Tash recognized the lead Enzeen.

"*Chood*." Smada's voice was like a dagger. "What is going on here!"

Chood returned Smada's smoldering glare with a look of bored disdain. "Your doom."

"Bah!" Smada curled back to his usual prone position. "This is some trick of yours. There is a beast, a creature that tunnels under the ground and hides. It attacks from below."

Chood smiled. "The beast does not hide."

Next to Smada, the Gank pounded his fist on the hoversled deck. "Then where is the beast? Where!"

All the Enzeen chuckled. As it had before, Chood's smile became evil. "After all this time you still do not understand! The secret of D'vouran has escaped you." He laughed a low, cruel laugh. "You think you will be eaten by a creature beneath the planet. You do not realize that you will be eaten by the planet itself!"

Chapter Sixteen

Chood roared with laughter.

Tash shuddered. The planet. It was the planet. That was the source of her feeling of dread. That was why she felt like she was being watched. The planet-everything around her-was watching.

She looked down at the ground and wondered what waited beneath: invisible teeth tearing the flesh from their bones. The strength seemed to melt out of her legs, and she clung to Zak for support.

But Zak was just as scared. The ground, the simple, solid ground they walked on every minute of every day, had suddenly become a monster. And the only thing protecting them was a tiny pendant hanging around Tash's neck.

In the midst of all this terror, Smada the Hutt picked a speck of dirt from his fingernail. He had already forgotten about his henchmen. They could be replaced. His devious mind had already bent around the terror of his situation, and he moved on in search of ways to exploit it. He was a Hutt after all.

"Chood," he began carefully. "I'm sure we can come to some sort of arrangement. Perhaps if I were to offer you, say, two million credits to assure my safe passage?"

"I wouldn't offer you safe passage even if I could," the Enzeen replied. "We don't control D'vouran. It feeds when it wants to. And it hungers."

Smada didn't miss a beat. "It can have the children."

"Thanks a lot, you ugly slug!" Zak yelled.

"Quiet, boy!" The bark crept back into Smada's voice. "We are bargaining here."

Chood shook his head. "There will be no bargain. D'vouran's hunger will be sated."

"Then why doesn't it eat you?" Tash wondered.

The Enzeen burst into coarse laughter. A few of them stomped their feet on the ground. Chood said, "We live in harmony with the planet. We make sure the planet is fed, and in return, the planet feeds us."

"*Feeds* you?" Zak asked. "How?"

In answer Chood opened his mouth wide. Again the wriggling tongue came out and plunged into the surface of D'vouran. Several of the other Enzeen did the same. The *Slurp-Slurp* of their feeding filled the air.

"I'm going to be sick," Zak moaned.

Deevee was the first to understand what he saw. "Since this planet is alive, the Enzeen must somehow suck nutrients from the ground."

"They're parasites," Tash whispered.

Chood's tongue detached itself from the ground and disappeared back into his mouth. He licked his lips and smiled. "D'vouran allows us to live on its body because we attract food. As long as it remains fed, we continue to feed off of it."

"You *lure* people here to be eaten?" Zak repeated incredulously.

Chood smiled. "Our goal is to serve." He laughed.

Tash shivered. But she couldn't help asking, "But why didn't it just swallow us whole when we first arrived?"

Chood looked at her as though she was a fool. "What purpose would that serve? D'vouran eats one meal a day, or two, but any

more and it would frighten other victims away. Instead D'vouran takes its meals slowly. It toyed with you, taking a victim here, a morsel there."

"Until it took the whole town!" Tash cried.

The Enzeen jabbed a finger at Tash. "And that is your fault!"

Tash cringed. "My fault? How?"

"You and that meddling madman began to discover D'vouran's secret. The planet could not risk your escape, so it consumed everyone in the town the minute they stepped out of their houses during the ground-quake."

"Then why doesn't it eat Hoole's brats?" Smada asked.

Chood blinked. He had only just realized that, while Smada sat atop his hoversled, Zak and Tash were standing with their feet on the ground. The Enzeen moved in.

"Keep away!" Deevee warned. He grabbed hold of one of the Enzeen, but another reached behind him and found a tiny switch on the droid's back. D-V9 was deactivated and fell to the ground. "Deevee!" Tash cried.

Chood pointed to the skimboard strapped to Zak's back. "You there!" he said to another Enzeen. "Remove that device."

Tash's heart stopped when Chood's eyes found the pendant around her neck.

To her surprise, he did not pull it off. "Interesting. You have been to the laboratory. I should have known something like this might have been left behind by the creators."

"Creators?" she asked. "Did someone *make* this planet?"

Chood was just about to pluck the pendant from her neck, sending her into oblivion, but his eye glinted suddenly. "I think I'll answer your question. Take them!"

The Enzeen moved with frightening speed. Zak and Deevee were dragged down beside Tash, and a heavy fiber net was cast over them. They struggled for a moment, but a threatening growl from the Enzeen quieted them down.

The rest of the Enzeen closed in on the hoversled. Smada's Gank guard panicked and jumped from the sled, dashing through

the trees. The Enzeen did not bother to chase him. They covered Smada in a net far larger and tougher than the one holding Tash, Zak, and Deevee.

The Gank had hardly run a dozen meters before he cried out and stumbled. His foot had caught on a hole in the ground. But when the killer tried to pull his foot loose, he found that the hole had closed up around his ankle. The Gank tried to kick himself loose of the planet. Instead some enormous force grabbed hold of his leg and pulled him down.

Chood laughed again. "You see? There is no escape from D'vouran. There is nowhere to run."

While most of the warriors stood guard over their captives, a few of the Enzeen vanished into the woods. They quickly reappeared, carrying two long, stout poles. Still tangled in their net, Zak, Tash, and Deevee were bundled up and lashed to one of the poles, where they hung like a sack of blumfruit. Smada was similarly lashed to the other, but not without a fight.

"Bloodworms! Bantha fodder! I'll tear your eyes out and eat your brains! Hutts will leave their slime tracks on your forgotten graves!"

He fought against the webbing that bound him, but the Enzeen nimbly avoided his clutching arms and thrashing tail. Two or three Enzeen stationed themselves at the ends of each pole, then lifted the carrying bars onto their shoulders.

Only when the humans were securely bound and their feet no longer touched the planet did Chood grab the pendant. With a yank, he pulled it from around her neck.

"Chood!" Tash pleaded. "What are you going to do?"

Chood hissed with undisguised glee. "I am going to give you the answer to your question. I am going to take you to the Heart of D'vouran. There you will meet a death that makes these other deaths seem like a gift. In the Heart of D'vouran, every last nutrient from your body can be carefully digested. You will be eaten very slowly. Eaten alive."

Chapter Seventeen

The Enzeen took them to the underground laboratory.

There, in the deep chamber, Zak, Tash, and Smada were brought to the edge of the pit. Tash thought she was as miserable as could be. Deevee's lifeless droid body was dumped next to her.

Terror seemed to flow from the pit like poisoned water from a fountain. Fear filled Zak and Tash. They were underground—*inside* a living creature, a terrible creature. And they were about to be fed to it.

"This is where your curiousity has gotten you," Chood declared. "You are about to enter a whole new world of pain. If you thought your friends and allies on the surface suffered, you were wrong. Their deaths were quick and merciful-most of them suffocated when they were pulled under D'vouran's surface. Here, in the Heart of D'vouran, the agony is a thousand times slower, and a thousand times worse, as the planet's victims are carefully digested week after painful week. Put them in!"

The Enzeen freed Zak and Tash from their net and shoved them onto the waiting platform. "Wait!" Chood ordered. He pointed to one of the Enzeen. "You! I thought I told you to remove that device!"

One of the Enzeen had forgotten to take away Zak's hoverboard. Under Chood's angry glare, he hurriedly detached the board from Zak's back, then stepped away.

It took four Enzeen to drag Smada onto the platform. They quickly freed him from his net as the platform was quickly shoved out over the pit. The massive Hutt thrashed about, roaring, "Bantha fodder! Nerf dung!"

The platform tilted crazily, and Zak and Tash clung to the support cables.

Chood addressed them from the edge of the pit, pointing down into the pit. "You wanted to know the secret of D'vouran. It lies here. From this place, D'vouran was first brought to life by its creators, and first learned to feed from this pit."

"Imperial scientists," Tash breathed. "They're always looking for new ways to hurt people."

Chood continued. "But the planet outgrew its creators and learned new and better ways to feed. The scientists lost control of their creation. They were eaten like all who came after them. Now you will follow them."

"Chood! Chood!" Smada bellowed. "It's not too late! Four million credits! I will buy you a new planet!"

The Enzeen ignored him. Several of the blue-skinned creatures pushed the crane's arm, and the parasites began lowering the rope.

"We've got to do something!" Zak yelled.

"This is my fault." Tash said. Her throat was dry. Her voice was hardly a whisper. "I should have listened to my feelings and made Uncle Hoole leave the planet. Then he'd be alive and we'd be safe!"

"It's not your fault, Tash," Zak said. "I didn't listen to you. No one did."

Tash peered down into the pit. Something at the bottom was writhing. And it was getting higher. As they were lowered into the pit, the writhing, throbbing mass rose up to meet them.

Tash couldn't watch. She looked up, into the faces of the Enzeen who ringed the pit. The more D'vouran ate, the more they could feed. All of them watched hungrily.

All of them but one.

The Enzeen who had taken the skimboard turned to Chood. Without warning, he raised the skimboard as high as he could, then brought it crashing down on Chood's head!

Chood crumpled to the ground. Instantly the Enzeen pounced on him, tearing something small and shimmering from Chood's hand.

The pendant.

The other Enzeen charged. But the pendant-holder did something completely unexpected.

He changed shape. The parasites found themselves confronted not by one of their own but by a snarling Wookiee.

"Uncle Hoole!" Tash and Zak cried at once.

"Hoole!" boomed Smada. "Get us out of here!"

The Enzeen hesitated for only a moment. Then they swarmed the Wookiee, pounding him from every direction. The Wookiee fought back with powerful blows from one hand while he held the pendant high with the other.

And all the while, the platform continued to descend.

One of the Enzeen was thrown over the side of the pit. Zak and Tash watched as he fell, screaming, into the writhing molten mass below. In moments, all the Enzeen had been tossed aside.

With a few long strides, the Wookiee reached the crane. But before he could reverse its direction, something hard and heavy struck him from behind, slamming him against the crane. The crane's instruments snapped under the Wookiee's weight, and the platform stopped. The blow also broke Hoole's concentration, and he suddenly reverted back to his own Shi'ido shape as he fell to the ground.

Chood stood over Hoole, holding a thick metal pipe. "Give me that pendant!" He grabbed Hoole, trying to pry the crystal from the Shi'ido's fingers. They struggled right on the edge of the

pit. Hoole was too groggy to resist, and in moments the pendant had changed hands again.

But just as he stood up, Chood lost his footing. He slipped and fell into the pit of D'vouran.

Taking the pendant with him.

Chood and the pendant vanished into the rising lava, and a moment later the molten mass shuddered and heaved.

"Pull us up!" Tash yelled. "Uncle Hoole! Pull us up!"

Hoole staggered toward the crane. But it wouldn't budge. "The crane is damaged! I can't move it!"

Beneath them, Tash could see the lava rising faster and faster. Great globs of molten planet leaped and sputtered toward them. D'vouran looked angry.

"We'd better think of something," she said, "or we're all going to die!"

Chapter Eighteen

It was Zak who came up with the answer. "My skimboard!" he called up. "Do you still have my skimboard?"

Hoole picked it up. "Here! But it's not working."

"I can fix it! Toss it down!"

Hoole was as steady now as when the *Lightrunner* was out of control. He carefully measured the distance, and then tossed the hoverboard out and down into the pit.

Zak, Tash, and Smada all watched it spin through the air toward them. For a moment Tash thought it was going to miss them. But it landed dead in the middle of the platform as all three prisoners grabbed it.

"Got it!" Zak said. "Just give me a minute."

Tash looked down. "We don't have a minute! Hurry!" The molten ground was only few meters below them, and it was rising fast.

"I think I've got it," Zak said, working frantically. "I've got it!"

The skimboard hummed to life. Zak jumped aboard and tested the ride. "It works!"

Zak, on the skimboard, hovered a few meters over the rising lava. He held his hand out to Tash, who took it and hopped quickly onto the board. She looked at the massive Hutt beside her. "But how are you going to fit him on here?"

"That is not a problem," Smada rumbled, "since I intend to leave you behind. Give me that board!"

The Hutt reached out to grabbed at Zak, but Zak slashed away and hovered a few meters off. "Don't be selfish! We can all make it if we work together!"

"No, no!" Smada howled. "I must have that device! It's mine!" with surprising agility, the Hutt lunged through the air. His fat fingertips grasped the edge of the skimboard, which tilted to one side, almost throwing Zak and Tash off.

The enormous Hutt's weight was too much for the hot-wired board. It began to sink quickly, like an overcrowded lifeboat taking on water.

"You're going to kill us all!" Tash yelled.

"Get back on the platform!" Zak pleaded. "We'll get off and we'll find a way to pull you up.

"Do you take me for a fool?" Smada snorted. "Let... me... on!"

But the skimboard had dropped almost to the molten surface. A weird tentacle of liquid mud reached up and wrapped itself around Smada's body, and the crime lord roared in pain and let go of the skimboard. The Hutt was sucked down into the molten mud of D'vouran.

As the Hutt fell, the skimboard, freed of his weight, rose upward.

But not high enough. The top of the pit was still six meters above them.

"Take us higher!" Tash said. "Get us out of here!" "I can't," Zak said. "I'm at full power. The skimboard won't hover any higher than this."

"What do we do now?"

Zak looked at the wall of the pit. "I'll tell you what we're going to do, " he said. "We're going to pull a vertical ride. And we're going to set a record."

Zak pressed the accelerator and guided the skimboard smoothly toward one end of the pit. He honestly didn't know if

he could do it. He had blown his run yesterday morning, and that had only been five meters. Now he was going for six. A record.

Plus he was carrying a passenger. No one had ever pulled a vertical climb carrying passengers before. This really would be a record.

If he made it.

Zak took a deep breath. He would only get one chance. If he failed, he and his sister would be pitched backward, right into the Heart of D'vouran.

Zak gritted his teeth. "Hang on tight."

He bent into a crouch and kicked the skimboard into high gear. It slid rapidly toward the wall.

Ten meters. Seven meters. Five. Three. Now!

Anticollision buffers kicked in, bouncing the board's nose up into the air. Zak jammed all power from the bottom vents to the rear drive and leaned straight up, reaching for the ceiling high above. He felt the board shudder beneath his feet.

The engine whined. They weren't going to make it, he thought. It was a good try. It was the best ride of his life, but the pit was just too...

Then he was rocketing out of the pit, straight as a blaster bolt, up into the laboratory with Tash still on board.

"Yeeeahhhhh!"

Zak leaned forward, tipping the nose so that the bottom of the board was pointing down. The skimboard dropped until it reached its hovering altitude.

"Zak, you did it!" his sister cried.

"This is no time for celebration," Hoole warned.

Inside the pit, the churning grew more violent. Mud that looked like molten lava leaped up from the edges, grasping for prey. Zak and Tash pressed themselves against the walls of the laboratory.

"What's happening?" Zak yelled.

"It's the pendant!" Hoole replied. "It created an energy field D'vouran didn't like. That's why it wouldn't eat whoever was in contact with it. Now it's swallowed the energy field whole!"

Hoole ran to the corner where Deevee had been dumped and quickly reactivated the droid. D-V9 staggered to his feet. "Up the stairs!" Hoole commanded.

They ran for the stairs-Hoole and Tash helping Deevee along-that led up to the next level.

Just in time. The mud spilled over the edge of the pit, coating the floor in violent, shuddering slime. And it continued to rise.

They reached the exit. Only a few hours ago, Bebo had pushed Tash down that same hole.

"Zak," Hoole said. "Is this device powerful enough to carry you three back to the spaceport?"

"I think so."

"But we're not leaving you behind, Master Hoole!" Deevee insisted.

"Of course not," the Shi'ido replied.

Then Hoole vanished. For a moment they thought he was truly gone. Then Tash nearly jumped as a tiny white rodent jumped onto her leg and scampered up to her shoulder.

"Let's go!" she said.

The mud had crept up the stairs behind them. It was rising through the upper room now. It was chasing them.

Zak, Tash, and Deevee all crowded onto the skimboard. They barely fit, but when Zak hit the thrusters, it still lifted off the ground.

As quickly as he could, Zak guided the skimboard up and out of the laboratory. They rose up and out of the hole.

And into a nightmare.

All around them, as far as the eye could see, the ground had begun to boil. Trees sank into a boiling lava swamp. Balls of liquid dirt rose up and burst angrily around them. Snakelike strands of mud reached up to block their escape.

Zak pushed the skimboard along as fast as he dared, afraid that they would lose their balance and fall into D'vouran's waiting mass.

They passed over the town. Only the tops of the houses were visible. The rest had been sucked down into the muck.

"The spaceport's still standing!" Deevee said.

They could see the walls of the landing port, half sunk in mud. The top was still clear.

The skimboard flew through the spaceport gates and up the stairs. The minute the launchpad's tarmac was underneath them, Hoole leaped from Tash's shoulder, transforming in midair. He hit the ground running. "There's no time to lose!" he cried.

"Look!" Tash cried.

Large cracks opened up in the thick blast walls, and bubbling liquid earth began to ooze onto the tarmac. "Get to the ship!" Hoole ordered.

The ooze wrapped itself around the landing gear of the other ships. As they scrambled into the *Lightrunner*, the mud was already reaching toward them.

Chapter Nineteen

By the time Tash got to the cockpit, Hoole had already completed the ignition sequence and was ready to lift off. Zak and Tash strapped themselves in.

Hoole powered up the repulsor lift. The thrusters fired-but the ship didn't move.

Pressing her face against the transparent viewport, Tash looked down at the launchpad floor. The tarmac had completely vanished under D'vouran's mud. The living sludge rose waist-high all through the spaceport. The *Lightrunner* was caught in its unbreakable grip.

"We're trapped!" Deevee cried.

"I don't think my skimboard's going to help us this time," said Zak.

"It won't have to," Tash said. "Look up there!"

In the sky above the spaceport, a saucer-shaped ship appeared. It dove toward them with surprising agility for a battered old Corellian freighter. Its pilot guided the ship over the *Lightrunner*, then skillfully powered down his repulsors until the freighter hovered only a few meters above the *Lightrunner*. It was a risky manoeuvre for most pilots.

But most pilots weren't Han Solo.

Zak and Tash popped open the top hatch of the *Lightrunner*. The noise from the underside of the *Millennium Falcon* was deafening, but it was a welcome sound to them, followed by the even more welcome sight of the *Falcon*'s belly- hatch opening wide. The face of Chewbacca the Wookiee poked through, roaring for them to hurry.

The boiling mud was halfway up the sides of the *Lightrunner*.

While Hoole pushed from below, Zak and Tash pulled Deevee up. Then they carried him over to the *Falcon*'s underside hatch. The Wookiee grabbed Deevee with one massive paw and easily hauled him up. Zak and Tash were next. Chewbacca picked them up as if they were rag dolls and brought them aboard Han Solo's ship, where he handed them off to the waiting arms of Luke Skywalker.

Han Solo's voice crackled over the comm system. "Come on, come on, what's taking so long down there?"

As soon as everyone was aboard, Luke signaled, "Everyone's accounted for, Han. Now get us out of here!"

The *Falcon* roared into motion.

Zak, Tash, and Hoole left Deevee in the care of Luke's droids, C-3P0 and R2-D2. When they reached the cockpit a moment later, the *Falcon* was flying five kilometers over D'vouran. Leia vacated the copilot's chair so Chewbacca could take over.

Solo glanced down at the churning surface of the planet. "Something strange is happening down there. You're pretty lucky we stopped by."

"Luck had nothing to do with it," Leia said. "Luke suggested we swing back this way and see how you were doing. That's when we saw all four of you on the skimboard."

Hoole spoke quickly. "You must get us out of here as fast as you can."

"No problem," Han Solo drawled. "Whatever's going on down there, you're safe in the *Falcon*."

Han pointed his ship toward outer space, then leaned back and listened as Hoole hastily explained what they had discovered about D'vouran.

Han looked skeptical. "Look, something's obviously churning things up down there. But a living planet? Gotta be a mistake of some kind. We'll sort it out once we're in hyperspace. Chewie, get ready to cut out the sublights."

Chewbacca checked his instruments, then growled.

"What do you mean we're still within D'vouran's gravity?" Solo muttered. "We've been going full thrusters for four minutes. We should be halfway outta this star system by now."

He double-checked the readings. The cocky grin left his face. "I've got a bad feeling about this."

"What is it, Han?" Leia asked.

Solo turned the *Falcon* so that they could just make out D'vouran through the viewport. "I don't think we've gotten away yet."

"What do you mean?" Tash felt her heart sink.

"D'vouran is following us."

Chapter Twenty

"That's crazy!" Leia said. "Planets don't move."

"Well this one is. And it's getting closer!"

Tash's voice dropped to a horrified whisper. "Didn't you say when you came here, you arrived twenty minutes early?"

"That's right," Luke recalled.

"And we were early, too," Hoole added. He looked out at the planet. At this distance, the writhing ground could not be seen. D'vouran looked calm and beautiful. He muttered, "It does move."

"Can you get into hyperspace, Han?" Luke asked. "We'll be safe there."

"No can do, kid. Not while we're inside the planet's gravity field. And I don't think it plans on letting us out. Chewie, lock in the auxiliary power!"

As Zak, Tash, and the others watched, pilot and copilot labored over their controls, pouring every ounce of the *Falcon*'s power into its engines. But when Tash checked the viewport again, D'vouran looked bigger and closer.

"Come on, Han," Leia urged. "You always said this ship was the fastest thing in space."

Sweat poured down Han Solo's brow. "Yeah, well, I never had to race a planet before. Chewie, draw all power from the

shields!" The Wookiee growled. "Did that, huh? How about the gun turrets?" Chewbacca snarled. "All right, all right! Just checking."

D'vouran was now close enough to fill the viewport.

Han sat back in his chair. For a split second he looked like he'd been beaten. Then he straightened up. "All right, let's turn the tables on this thing. Gravity's our problem, right? Let's just make it our friend."

He whipped the *Falcon* around hard, throwing everyone off balance. When they recovered, the ship was heading back toward the planet. Chewbacca howled.

"Han, what are you doing!" Luke cried. "You're heading straight for it!"

"Hold on!" the pilot shouted.

Pulled by the planet's gravity and pushed by its own engines, the *Falcon* picked up enormous speed and plunged toward D'vouran. At the last possible moment, Han veered away. Keeping just within gravity's reach, he gunned his engines and scraped along the planet's atmosphere. The belly of his ship left a trail of flames in the air as the freighter looped around the monstrous planet.

The effect was like a slingshot. The vessel whipped around the far side of the planet, and Han broke orbit. Driven by its increased momentum, the *Falcon* was flung out into space, far ahead of D'vouran.

Chewbacca barked a comment. "Gravitational force is dropping!" Han translated.

"You did it!" Leia cried. "We're in open space!" Freed of D'vouran's gravity, the *Falcon* picked up even more speed.

He turned to his passengers nonchalantly. "The slingshot gimmick. Oldest trick in the manual."

Zak and Tash looked at each other and grinned. Uncle Hoole had not taken his eyes off the planet. "Look," he said.

"I don't believe it," Tash whispered. Even with everything she had seen, she found it hard to grasp what was happening.

The planet D'vouran was squirming. It wriggled and trembled as though trying to change its shape. Bright flashes of light that looked like volcanic eruptions appeared on its surface. The planet bulged outward, becoming a horribly misshapen mass. Then it collapsed in on itself, churning and swirling into a smaller and smaller lump of writhing matter in space. With a final shudder, D'vouran vanished altogether.

"I don't believe it," Zak said.

"Is it gone?" Tash asked.

"It seems to have... devoured itself," Hoole said. "Most remarkable."

"Yeah, well we're not sticking around to admire it," said Han. "Chewie, get ready to make the jump. Now!"

The pilot grabbed a large lever and pulled down hard. Zak and Tash were thrown backward as the *Falcon* ripped through the fabric of realspace.

Epilogue

In the *Falcon*'s common area, Tash sat across from Uncle Hoole.

"I thought I had been left alone," Tash said. "I thought everyone had been killed. Like my parents."

There was the slightest crack in Hoole's usually grim expression. "I'm sorry, Tash. While you were gone, I saw my chance to spy on the Enzeen. So I became one of them."

"But why did you wait so long to help us?" she demanded. "We could have been killed."

The Shi'ido explained, "I needed to know what was going on. I couldn't find out until Chood spoke to you. I helped you as soon as I could."

"What did you find out?" Princess Leia asked. "What was that thing?"

Hoole said, "I didn't find out much more than Tash did. But my best guess would be this: D'vouran was some kind of scientific experiment that went wrong. The Empire is always experimenting with mutations and biological weapons. They lost control of this one. The pendant was some kind of protective shield. The technology in that small device must have been amazing. I wish I'd been able to study it."

"Well, it couldn't have worked too well," Zak pointed out. "The scientists were all gone. They must have been eaten."

"Were they?" Hoole wondered. "It's just as likely that the creators simply abandoned their project and left it to fend for itself. They may still be out there somewhere."

Tash remembered Chood's evil grin. "And the Enzeen'?"

"Parasites, just as you and Deevee guessed. They fed off of D'vouran, and D'vouran allowed them to survive as long as they attracted more food."

"How did they get there?" Zak wondered.

"Maybe they crash-landed like Bebo," Tash suggested, "but the planet didn't like the taste of them."

"Perhaps," Hoole mused. "But I fear the worst. I think whoever is responsible for creating D'vouran also created the Enzeen to watch over and feed the planet. Someone is using science to create mutants."

Luke Skywalker asked the question on everyone's mind. "But whoever is behind these experiments-what are they trying to do?"

"I can't be sure," Hoole replied. "But I intend to find them."

Yet again, Tash remembered Smada's words, and she wondered why Hoole wanted to find these mysterious scientists-to catch them, or join them? She decided to watch him closely.

Aloud, she said gratefully, "Well, whoever it was, at least his experiment is over. D'vouran is gone, and it will never bother anyone again."

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Light-years away, in the far reaches of the Outer Rim, in an area of space ignored by both the Empire and the Rebel Alliance, a commuter starship chugged through hyperspace, carrying miners from an asteroid field back to their home planet.

To the pilot's surprise, his passenger ship suddenly dropped out of hyperspace with a jolt. The pilot checked his instruments, and once he was sure his ship was undamaged, he realized that

his vessel had fallen into orbit around a beautiful blue-green planet.

"That's odd," he muttered. "I've never seen that on the charts before..."

Book Two
City of the Dead

Prologue

In his hidden fortress, the scientist strode up to a heavy security door. Next to the door a massive GK-600 guardian droid leveled a heavy blaster cannon and demanded, "Voice recognition and password."

The scientist spoke calmly: "Project Starscream."

"Password verified." The guardian droid lowered its blaster and opened the security door.

The scientist stepped inside his control module. From this command center, he monitored a galactic network of computers and living agents, all working on various aspects of Project Starscream. But only the Emperor, Darth Vader, and he, the scientist, knew Project Starscream's ultimate goal.

"Soon now," the scientist told himself with evil glee, "very soon my power over life and death will be complete. Project Starscream is sure to please the Emperor, and then my control over the galaxy will begin. Nothing can stop me."

An alarm sounded.

The scientist sat down in front of his control module. Above a panel of computer controls sat five view-screens that allowed the scientist to watch over the five stages of his grand experiment.

One of those viewscreens had just gone blank. Frowning, the scientist punched a control button. Instantly, streams of information sped across a computer screen. As the scientist read them, his frown deepened.

His first experiment, on the planet D'vouran, had gone off-line. D'vouran was a living planet, a planet he had created as the first part of Project Starscream. Something-*someone*-had caused D'vouran to break free. Now the living planet was spinning through the galaxy, out of control.

Hidden transmitters on the planet had captured images of the intruders just before D'vouran went wild. The scientist saw the images of two human children, a droid, and...

...*Him*.

The scientist let out a snarl of hatred. It couldn't be a coincidence that *he* had been on D'vouran, could it?

For a moment, anger filled the scientist. He reached for a button on his control console. With one command the scientist could order the destruction of Hoole and his companions.

But he did not. His enemy was well known in the galaxy. His murder might attract unwanted attention. And if the Rebels got wind of these experiments, they might try to stop them just as they had stopped the Death Star six months ago.

Instead he pushed a different button. Another one of the viewscreens lit up, and the scientist leaned back into the shadows so that his face could not be seen. On the screen the image of a horribly scarred man appeared.

"Evazan," the scientist demanded, "give me a progress report."

The man on the screen, Evazan, sneered. "I'll give it to you. But first it's time we dispensed with the mystery. I'm tired of working for a faceless man."

From the shadows, the scientist warned, "You are told what you need to know. And you are paid well."

"Not that well," the man called Evazan replied. "You keep hinting that you're someone powerful in the Emperor's inner

circle. But for all I know, you're a madman leading me on a wild mynock hunt." Evazan glared at the screen. "Now either you tell me who you are or I take my experiments to the highest bidder."

"That would not be wise."

"Who says?"

"I say." The scientist leaned forward, out of the shadows, at last revealing his face to his hired henchman.

.Evazan's eyes widened in surprise. "You!"

"That's correct," the scientist said. "Now listen carefully, or I'll feed you to my Cyborrean battle dogs. You must finish your experiments immediately. I have reason to believe that an old enemy of mine has discovered my work and that he will follow the trail to you."

Evazan sneered. "If any intruders show up here, I'll take care of them."

"Do it quietly," the scientist warned. "And quickly. The being who may try to interfere is more powerful than you suspect. You must destroy him without arousing suspicion."

Evazan nodded. "I have just the means. There's an old superstition on this planet that will provide a perfect cover. Just tell me who the target is. "

"His name," the scientist said, "is Hoole."

Chapter One

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Zak sat up in bed. *What was that noise?*

Something was wrong. He was in his own room, in his own house on the planet Alderaan. But that was impossible.

I can't be here. Alderaan was destroyed by the Empire.

Zak and his sister, Tash, had lost their family, their friends, and their home. They had spent the last six months in the care of their only living relative, an uncle named Hoole.

So Zak knew he couldn't be home, but everything around him looked and felt so real.

Maybe it was all a bad dream! Maybe Alderaan wasn't destroyed. Maybe Mom and Dad are still alive!

To Zak a bad dream would explain a lot. It would explain how his mother and father, and his entire world, could have vanished in a blast of Imperial laser fire. It would explain how he and his sister had been put into the care of their mysterious Uncle Hoole, a shape-changing alien scientist. And it would explain how they had barely escaped from a monstrous planet that had almost eaten them alive.

"It explains things," Zak said out loud, "because that was all a dream. It never happened. And that means I'm home!"

He jumped out of bed.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

That noise had awakened him. Now it repeated itself.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

The noise was coming from outside his bedroom window. Zak got out of bed. His feet felt heavy, and his vision was blurred. He fumbled his way to the transparisteel window. He was about to press the Open button but suddenly stopped.

On the other side of the window, he saw the empty void of deep space.

Deep space? How could his *bedroom* be traveling through deep space?

But it was. In the darkness, Zak could see stars and distant solar systems blazing like tiny points of light.

He rubbed his sleep-filled eyes, but the vision didn't change.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

The sound came from just below his window. Zak resisted the urge to open it. If he did, the vacuum of space would suck him out. He pressed his face against the pane, trying to see what was down there.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

The object started to drift upward into Zak's range of vision. Zak gasped and stumbled back from the window.

A dead, gray hand rose into view.

It was followed by a pale white arm, and then strands of blackened hair. Finally the figure's face floated into view. It was white with empty sockets for eyes, but he recognized the face anyway.

It was his mother.

As he watched in horror, the mouth moved, and Zak heard his mother's voice moan, "Zak, why did you leave us behind?"

Zak screamed.

He opened his eyes.

And found himself sitting up in a bunk onboard the ship known as the *Millennium Falcon*. His bedroom on Alderaan was

gone. The corpse was gone. Tash was sitting bolt upright in a nearby bunk.

"Zak! What's the matter?" his older sister cried.

Zak tried to catch his breath. "I-I guess I was dreaming," he finally said. "I dreamed I was in my room... but my room was floating in space. And then I saw Mom, but she was floating through space, too. Dead." He squinted to hold back a tear. He couldn't say any more.

Tash walked over to her brother and put a comforting arm around his shoulder. Before she could speak, the door to their small cabin slid open and the snarling face of Chewbacca the Wookiee appeared. He was holding a wicked- looking bowcaster, and his enormous frame filled most of the doorway. Behind him, Tash and Zak could just see the silver frame of the humanoid droid, D-V9.

Chewbacca growled a question.

"I think the Wookiee wants to know what's going on," D-V9 said. "So do I. "

D-V9-or Deevee for short-cocked his mechanical head sideways in impatience. The droid had been Uncle Hoole's research assistant for years, until Zak and Tash came along and Hoole had made Deevee their caretaker. Deevee didn't always appreciate his new role, especially when one of his charges caused chaos in the middle of the night.

"It's nothing, Deevee," Zak said. "I just had a bad dream."

"Hey, what's all the shouting?" demanded Han Solo, squeezing past his Wookiee companion.

"Nothing." Tash answered for her brother. "Sorry if we woke you."

"No problem," the starpilot said. "The navicomputer says we're coming up on our destination anyway. Your uncle is in the lounge with Luke and Leia. You might as well get up."

***

It didn't take Zak and Tash long to get ready. They had lost everything when they were orphaned six months ago. Anything that they had acquired since then, they had lost again only days before, when the planet D'vouran destroyed their ship and nearly took them with it. They had been saved by the *Millennium Falcon* and its crew.

A few moments later, Zak and Tash entered the common area of the *Millennium Falcon*, where Uncle Hoole was waiting for them.

Zak was fascinated by his uncle's appearance. At first glance, Hoole looked like a tall, thin human being-until you noticed that his skin was a light gray color, and his fingers were incredibly long. Hoole, who was only their uncle by marriage, was a member of the Shi'ido species. Although Zak knew that most Shi'ido were quiet and reserved, he could never quite get used to his uncle's grim, brooding personality.

There was another thing about Hoole that Zak couldn't get used to. His uncle was a shape-changer. Like all Shi'ido, Hoole could transform into almost any living creature. Zak had seen it happen more than once. The memory made him shudder.

"Good. You're up," Hoole said. "We will be landing momentarily."

"Landing?" Tash asked.

Hoole nodded. "We need to purchase a new ship. This is the closest inhabited planet."

"What's it called?" Tash asked.

"Necropolis."

"Necropolis?" Zak said. "What a strange name. What does it mean?"

"It means," Hoole said as they felt the *Millennium Falcon* descend into gravity, "City of the Dead."

***

The *Millennium Falcon* plunged through a swirling mist and landed on a dark platform. With a groan, the ship's hatchway opened, casting pale light onto the ground. The landing pad was built of ancient stone blocks. In the mist-shrouded distance, Tash and Zak could see the shadowy outlines of tall stone buildings crowded together like rows of headstones.

Beside Zak and Tash stood Han Solo, Chewbacca, and the droid companions C-3P0 and R2-D2, along with the other friends they had made: Princess Leia, who was from Zak and Tash's home planet, Alderaan, and a young man named Luke Skywalker.

"Boy, you sure can pick them," Han said. "Look at this place."

It was gloomy and depressing. Mist hung heavily in the air, and the darkness gave way reluctantly to light from the *Falcon's* landing gear.

"Necropolis is a very ancient civilization," Hoole explained. "It has traditions that are thousands of years old."

"Yeah," Zak said, "and it looks like the buildings are even older."

"Look, I hate to say it, but this is as far as we can take you," Han Solo said, patting Zak on the shoulder.

Princess Leia frowned. "Han's right. We've delayed too long already."

"We understand," Tash said. She and Zak suspected that the crew of the *Millennium Falcon* were part of the Rebel Alliance. In fact, Zak had even *asked* them if they were. None of them admitted it, but the way they had acted and the fact that Leia was from Alderaan made Tash and Zak pretty certain that their new friends were Rebels.

"Are you sure you're going to be all right?" Luke Skywalker asked. "We don't want to just abandon you here."

Uncle Hoole answered. "We will be fine. We'll be able to buy a ship here and continue on our way." Goodbyes were said and thanks were given all around. The droid Artoo-Detoo whistled sadly.

"You're quite right, Artoo," replied his golden counterpart, Threepio. "It is a sentimental moment."

"Touching," Deevee said dryly. "My circuits are overloading with emotion. "

Luke said a special goodbye to Tash. She was fascinated by the ancient warriors known as Jedi Knights, and she had taken a liking to Luke since the moment she'd seen his Jedi lightsaber.

He shook her hand respectfully. "Good luck, Tash. May the Force be with you." Then he and his friends returned to their ship.

Zak, Tash, Deevee, and Uncle Hoole watched as the *Falcon's* hatch closed. Then, with a roar of its powerful engines, the *Falcon* rose into the atmosphere and vanished.

"They were a strange bunch," Zak said. "Nice, but strange. I wonder if we'll ever see them again?"

Tash nodded. "We will."

"How do you know?" her brother asked. But Tash only shrugged. "I just know it."

Zak shook his head. "You're strange, too."

He and Tash followed Uncle Hoole toward one of the dark alleys that led away from the landing pad. The cobblestones beneath their feet were old and slick with moisture. The alley was narrow and lined with what looked like tall, narrow boxes. But as they entered the alley, Zak saw that they weren't boxes. They were very old coffins, open and standing up on their ends.

And they were full.

Inside each coffin Zak saw a human shape draped in a gray burial shroud.

"*Ugh!*" Zak wrinkled his nose. "Are these.. mummies?"

"Nonsense," Hoole replied. "Necropolis has an ancient and respected civilization. You must learn to appreciate alien cultures."

Zak didn't hear him. He was too busy staring at the mysterious coffins.

The cloth-wrapped figures stirred. Zak froze in his tracks. One of the mummies had opened its eyes.

Chapter Two

They came out of their cases, staggering toward the small group.

"Welcome to Necropolis," one of the mummies moaned.

Another of the creatures clutched at Tash, and Zak felt a hand grab his shoulder.

"Let go!" he yelled. He tried to push the creature away. To his surprise, the startled mummy stumbled backward and fell to the ground with a grunt.

"Zak!" Uncle Hoole said irritably. "Behave yourself."

"What?" Zak couldn't believe it. His uncle and Deevee looked perfectly calm as the mummies formed a tight circle around them. Then Hoole reached out and shook the hand of the nearest mummy!

Zak was even more surprised when the mummy suddenly removed the shroud from his head. He had the face of a healthy, living human-a very sour-looking human face.

"Uh-oh," Tash whispered.

Zak looked down at the mummy he'd pushed. The rags had slipped off, and beneath them Zak saw a boy his own age, with a big smile on his face.

Deevee shook his chrome-plated head at Zak. "If you spent more time paying attention to my social studies lessons, you

might have learned that this is a traditional welcome on Necropolis."

The boy Zak had pushed stood up. "That's right. It's an old tradition. No one really remembers why we do it."

"*I* remember," said the sour-faced man. "Our ancestors did this to scare away the evil spirits that strangers bring. One never knows who might come to wake the dead."

"Wake the dead?" Zak asked. "Are you serious?"

"That's another one of our old Necropolis superstitions. The old-timers believe that if proper respect isn't paid, the dead of Necropolis will rise up." The boy shrugged. "Of course no one believes the old legends anymore except Pylum here."

He pointed to the man, who stiffened. "I am the Master of Cerements, Kairn. It is my duty to make sure the old ways are kept alive so that the ancient Curse of Sycorax does not fall on us."

"What sort of curse?" Zak queried.

Kairn rolled his eyes. "Just a tale-teller's story."

"If you don't believe it, why do you do all this?" Zak asked Kairn.

"Pylum managed to convince our parents that we should learn about the old traditions, so here I am." Kairn shrugged, then flashed a mischievous grin. "Besides, it's fun to scare visitors-except when they get violent!"

Kairn and Zak both laughed.

Once Pylum had finished his traditional welcome and made sure that no "evil spirits" lingered around the visitors, he said they were free to go where they pleased in Necropolis.

"Except the cemetery," the grim man said. "It is sacred ground."

Hoole told Pylum that they had lost their last star-ship and needed to buy a new one. They also needed a place to stay for the night. Pylum suggested that they try the local hostel.

"Come on, I'll take you there," Kairn offered. "Necropolis is a safe place, but its streets are old and winding, and it's easy to get lost."

The streets of Necropolis were dark, but Kairn's personality was bright enough to light their way. He laughed and chatted as he guided them through the twists and curves of the streets.

He explained the history of Necropolis's culture as they walked. "The legends say that centuries ago, a witch named Sycorax lived in Necropolis. She claimed to have the power to bring back the dead. The people accused her of being a fake, and they did something horrible. They killed the witch's son and told her to bring *him* back to life."

"That's awful," Tash said, shivering.

"Yes, things weren't as peaceful around here in the old days," Kairn said.

"Did it work?" Zak asked. He was very interested in the story. "I mean, was she able to bring her son back from the dead?"

Kairn shook his head. "Instead of bringing her son back, Sycorax died of a broken heart. She and her son were buried together."

"They were what?" Tash asked.

"They were buried."

"*Buried?*" Zak repeated. "You still bury people'?"

Kairn blinked. "Of course. Don't your people do that?"

Deevee, always eager to join a conversation about culture, interrupted. "Oh, quite a few planets inhabited by humans have abandoned that practice," he began cheerily. "They've opted for more efficient methods of body disposal, such as cremation or disintegration. In many cultures, Kairn, burial is considered a bit old-fashioned."

"Not here," Kairn sighed. "My people like the old ways. Necropolitans have been burying their dead for thousands and thousands of years."

Zak almost didn't want to ask his next question. "Where... Where do you put them all?" He looked down at his feet, imagining what might be underneath him at that very moment.

There was a mischievous gleam in Kairn's eye. "In the cemetery. Maybe I'll show you."

Deevee returned the discussion to its original topic. "You were telling us about your culture's legend of the witch Sycorax?"

"Right. Just before she died, she cursed the entire planet, saying that if anyone on Necropolis ever ignored the dead, the dead would rise up to take revenge. Ever since then, we Necropolitans have been very careful to keep the dead happy. Believe it or not, the Master of Cerements' only job is to make sure the old rituals are observed. That's what Pylum does."

"You sound like you don't believe it," said Tash.

Kairn snorted. "Those old stories are for little kids. When people die, that's it. They don't come back."

Zak, thinking of his parents, whispered, "I suppose not.

"Here we are!" Kairn announced cheerfully.

They had reached the hostel. Like the rest of Necropolis, the outside of the building was dark and somber. But light streamed through narrow windows on either side of the door, promising warmth inside, and they could hear voices.

"Great!" Zak said. "Let's get out of the gloom."

"Wait, Zak," Tash warned. "Remember what happened last time we strolled into a strange building. We had blasters pointed at our heads."

Hoole studied Tash with sudden seriousness. "Is this one of your feelings, Tash?" the Shi'ido asked.

On D'vouran, Tash had felt a sudden sense of dread come over her. No one had paid attention-not even Tash herself - - until it was almost too late. She didn't know how these feelings worked, or what caused them, but obviously Hoole was starting to take them seriously.

"I'm not sure."

"That was then and this is now," Zak said lightly. "It couldn't happen again."

He stepped up to the front door, which opened automatically to reveal a warmly lit room, where a crowd of Necropolitans sat in small groups. Light from a dozen glowpanels shone on delicately carved tables and polished wood floors.

It also gleamed on the barrel of a blaster held in the steady hand of a bounty hunter. It was pointed directly at them.

"My name," the bounty hunter said through an armored helmet, "is Boba Fett."

Tash recognized the name. She'd read about Boba Fett on the intergalactic information service known as the HoloNet. Boba Fett was said to be the greatest bounty hunter in the galaxy. They said he could bring anyone in dead or alive, and he had proved it a hundred times. He had tracked down wanted criminals from one end of the galaxy to the other. Once he accepted a job, no one could escape him.

Boba Fett was covered head to toe in armor and weapons. His face was hidden behind a gleaming metal helmet. His belt and pack bristled with weaponry that included a blaster rifle, deadly wrist rockets, and a nearly unbreakable capture cable. But the most terrifying thing about him was his low, menacing voice, which made Zak think of sliding gravel. Boba Fett spoke to the crowd.

"Where is Dr. Evazan?"

No one spoke. No one moved. Boba Fett was known throughout the galaxy as a deadly shot, and no one wanted his blaster pointed their way.

"What do we do?" Zak whispered.

"Nothing," Uncle Hoole said calmly. But Zak could see that Hoole was intrigued by the bounty hunter's presence. "This is not our concern."

Boba Fett spoke so low that his voice was almost a whisper. "I will say it once more. I tracked a wanted criminal named N'haz Mit to this planet and killed him. A week later I heard N'haz was

walking the streets of Necropolis. I had to come back and kill him again. I find that strange."

"Maybe he just got the wrong guy the first time," Tash whispered to Zak.

"Maybe," Zak replied, "but do *you* want to tell him that?"

Boba Fett continued. "My information suggests that Dr. Evazan——the man they call Dr. Death-is somehow responsible."

Fett held up a small holodisk. When he pressed the button, a nearly life- size image appeared next to him.

Dr. Evazan was frightening to behold. Half his face was scarred and mangled, and the other half was turned up in an arrogant sneer. As the hologram hummed, a recorded voice recited: "Name: Evazan. Also known as Dr. Death. Wanted for murder, medical malpractice, practicing medicine without a license, torture, and assault. Posing as a medical doctor, Evazan uses patients as subjects for unauthorized and often fatal experiments. Currently has the death sentence on twelve systems, including-"

"Enough." Boba Fett switched off the holodisk, and the gruesome image of Dr. Evazan vanished. "I want him. Now."

Boba Fett waited.

At first no one spoke. Finally it was Pylum who answered. "You are mistaken, bounty hunter," he said in a defiant voice. "No scientist is responsible for this mystery. If you saw a dead man walking, it is not because this Dr. Evazan is on our planet. It is because the people have forgotten the old customs. They have abandoned our traditions. They no longer honor those who have passed away." Pylum glared at the crowd. "And because of that, the dead are rising!"

Chapter Three

"Ridiculous."

That was all Boba Fett said in response to Pylum's declaration.

The other Necropolitans didn't seem to believe Pylum either. A few of them even hooted and jeered at the Master of Cerements, despite the presence of the bounty hunter. But Pylum continued.

"You'll see," he said, sweeping his fiery gaze across the crowd in the hostel. "The dead are angry, and they will have their revenge."

The armored bounty hunter waited, but no one volunteered any information about Dr. Evazan. Hidden behind his helmet, it was impossible to tell if he was angry, frustrated, or unconcerned. When no one answered his demand, he turned and stalked out of the hostel.

"So that was Boba Fett," Zak breathed. "Prime."

Hoole excused himself to begin his search for their new ship.

"I will return shortly," he said. "Do not leave the hostel grounds." Then, mysterious as always, the Shi'ido slipped out the door.

Zak and Tash spent the rest of the evening at the hostel with their new friend, Kairn. He and Zak took to each other immediately-they had the same sense of mischief and humor.

Kairn, it turned out, liked to skimboard as much as Zak did, and they took turns on the hoverboard that Zak kept with him.

Kairn even joined them for dinner at the hostel. When the food was served, the young Necropolitan scooped some of his dinner into a small bowl and put it off to the side without eating it.

"Saving some for later?" Zak joked. He had wolfed down his own food and was about to ask for seconds.

Kairn laughed. "No. It's another old custom. We set aside a portion of every meal in honor of the dead. For most of us, it's more of a tradition now than anything we really believe."

While they ate, Kairn told them more stories about Necropolis and its dark past.

"Lots of legends have built up around the Curse of Sycorax over the centuries. Pylum says that if you visit the graveyard at midnight, you can ask the witch to bring your loved ones back." Kairn chuckled. "Everyone laughs at those stories in the daytime, but I know a few people who more than half believe it, and some who've even tried it."

"Does it only work on buried people?" Zak asked. Tash, beside him, raised an eyebrow, but Zak ignored her and went on. "I mean, does the legend only work on bodies, or could it work on someone who was disintegrated?"

"I don't know. But Pylum says the power of the curse knows no boundaries. "

Pylum suddenly loomed over them. His eyes were filled with eager light. "Our ancestors were fools not to believe in the power of Sycorax. We must believe in the curse of the dead if we are to avoid their mistakes." Pylum glared at them for so long that Zak started to become uncomfortable. Then, without a word, the Master of Cerements turned away.

Tash whispered, "He certainly believes what he's saying, doesn't he?"

Kairn smiled nervously. "He's a fanatic. That's why they made him Master of Cerements."

After dinner Kairn said he had to get home, but he gave Zak a quick wink and whispered, "My friends and I have something fun planned for later. I'll see if I can include you."

Zak grinned. He was always ready for fun and adventure.

"So what do you think?" Zak asked Tash after Kairn had gone.

"Think about what?" she replied.

"About these Necropolitans and their beliefs. You know, that the dead come back."

Tash put down her datapad. "Are you kidding? Zak, that's just a legend. Even the Necropolitans don't believe it. Don't tell me you do."

Zak looked down at his shoes. "Um, of course not. But wouldn't it be prime if people really did come back? I mean, if you could see the people again who-"

"Zak." Tash made her voice as gentle as she could manage. When their parents died, she'd been devastated and hid herself away in her room. But Zak had pulled her out of her misery. Now she wondered if *he* was finally feeling their loss as much as she had. "Zak, I miss Mom and Dad as much as you do. But you can't think that just because of an old superstition, they might actually come back. I know it's hard to think about, but they're gone."

"How do we know?" Zak retorted. Tash could be frustrating. "We weren't there. I didn't tell you my whole dream last night," he confessed. "When I saw-When I saw mom, she also asked me something.

She asked, 'Why did you leave us behind?' Tash, it was like we abandoned them!"

"Stop it, Zak! We didn't abandon them. They were killed by the Empire. The whole planet was. And as much we hate it, we have to accept that Morn and Dad are gone. They're not coming back."

***

But they did come back. That night. As soon as Zak drifted off to sleep.

Zak again found himself in his bed in his room on Alderaan. He turned his head, and looking out the window, he saw the darkness of space, dotted with stars.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

He heard the sound of someone rapping at the transparisteel window.

Zak tried to sit up but couldn't. A great weight pressed down on his chest, pinning him in place.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

A pale figure floated into the window's view. It was his mother again. Behind her another figure floated: his father, his short hair bobbing in the vacuum of space. Their dead skin hung from their lifeless bones, but their mouths moved in a slow, haunting drawl.

"Zak, why did you leave us behind?"

"I didn't," he said hoarsely, "I thought you were dead!"

"You left us behind!"

Tap! Tap!

Their arms banged against the windowpane until it shattered inward with a crash.

The two ghostly images floated through the opening. Zak struggled to rise, but he was paralyzed. As they approached, Zak's nostrils filled with the smell of slowly decaying flesh. The corpses' skin was wrinkled and cracked from exposure to the icy cold of space. Their eyes were no more than black holes in their skulls.

"Mom," he whispered. "Dad. I'm sorry..."

"Come with us, Zak," his father moaned. "Zak, come with us." The horrible image of his father bent close to him, whispering, "Come with us!"

Zak woke with a start. The image of his dead parents vanished. "It was a dream," he said quickly to himself. His

window wasn't broken. There was nothing there. "It was only a dream."

Crash! Zak almost screamed as something banged against his window again.

Chapter Four

Zak waited. There were no more crashes.

He finally took a deep breath, and trying to be brave, went over to the transparisteel window and peeked out. There were no monsters or zombies outside. Instead, Zak saw Kairn and a group of boys getting ready to hurl some more stones at his window.

Finally letting his breath out, Zak pressed a button and the automatic window unsealed, letting in the cool night air. He leaned out.

Kairn waved and laughed when he saw Zak. "Sorry about that. I figured you'd want to come with us."

"Where?" Zak asked.

"Some friends and I are having a little midnight adventure. Into the graveyard," Kairn said. "Care to join us`? Unless, of course, you're too *scared*?"

Zak couldn't resist a taunt like that. "Wait there. I'm right behind you. "

***

Throwing on some clothes, Zak tiptoed out of his room. He went quietly past the rooms of Tash and Uncle Hoole. At the

end of the hall, he froze. There was Deevee, sitting in a chair at the top of the stairs.

"The bionic baby-sitter," Zak muttered. "Looks like this will be one short trip."

But as he crept closer, Zak realized that Deevee had shut himself down for the night. He would not power up unless someone came in range of his sensor field, activating his systems. The field only reached a half meter out from the droid's metal body, but Zak still had no desire to get caught by the sarcastic droid while trying to sneak out.

Better not risk it, he thought. There was always the window.

Zak's room was two levels up from the ground, but the building was covered in elaborate, ghoulish carvings. He started down, using the heads, arms, and claws of the carved monsters as a weird ladder. He stuck his hand into the roaring jaw of a six-legged beast and quietly called down to Kairn, "What are these carvings?"

"Just more legends," Kairn said, holding out his arms, ready to catch Zak. "The statues are supposed to frighten away evil spirits. If you ask me, they make better handholds."

On the ground, Kairn introduced Zak to a small group of Necropolitans, all about his age.

"So this is the offworlder that shoved you, huh?" one of them said to Kairn. "He doesn't look so brave to me."

"Yeah," teased another. "I bet he's an easy scare."

Zak was annoyed. "Are you joking? After the last planet I was on, this place is like a vacation."

"That's just what we wanted to hear!" said Kairn. He lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "But before you can join our group, there's a little test you have to pass."

"Yeah, we're particular about who joins our group," said another.

"Most people in Necropolis say they don't believe the old legends, but they're still scared of their own shadows," Kairn

continued. "At the landing pad you proved you were a little brave, but we need to make sure."

Zak scowled. "What kind of test?"

"Come on, we'll show you."

Kairn led the group of Necropolitan boys down the winding streets of the dark city. Zak followed eagerly. He was on a new planet, walking through a gloomy, alien city in the middle of the night with a group of boys he had only just met, but he felt at home for the first time in months.

Zak had lost all his friends when Alderaan was destroyed. Uncle Hoole hardly talked to him. Deevee was all right, but he wasn't the kind of friend who would help you climb out of your bedroom window in the middle of the night. Tash, Zak had to admit, could be a good friend sometimes, but she was his *sister*- so, in his book, she didn't really count.

But these boys, especially Kairn, reminded Zak of his own group. back on Alderaan. They had never caused any real trouble, of course, but they had their share of fun. Once, Zak and some of his friends had snuck into the teachers' washroom at their school and replaced the mirror with a hologram screen programmed to reflect anyone's image exactly-only twenty kilos heavier. Snack sales at the instructors' cantina had plummeted until the prank was discovered.

Now, for the first time in half a year, Zak felt like he had a chance to have some real fun. He decided instantly that he was going to make the most of it. By the time they reached their destination, Zak was laughing and joking with Kairn like they were old friends.

"This is it," Kairn said as they stopped in front of a huge, black wrought-iron gate.

Zak couldn't see beyond the thick mist of Necropolis. "What is it?"

One of the other boys said ominously, "It's the cemetery."

"The boneyard," Kairn added.

"Sacred ground!" said another in his best imitation of Pylum. They all laughed.

But Zak was too awestruck to smile. The cemetery was enormous. Beyond the black gates, row upon row of gravestones stretched on forever into the darkness.

"It's huge," he whispered.

"That's the true Necropolis," Kairn said. "The city of the dead."

"It's the most popular place in town," one of the others joked. "Everyone goes there. Eventually."

Zak asked, "You mean everyone's buried here? It must be crowded."

"I suppose, but so far no one's complained," Kairn said, laughing. "Here's the challenge. You have to go into the graveyard in the dead of night and stand on a grave in the middle of the cemetery."

"Go in there?" Zak asked hoarsely. He peered through the gate, imagining the rows of dead stacked just below the ground.

"Sure," Kairn said. "What have you got to lose?"

"His nerve," one of the others teased.

Zak considered. "If I accepted, what else would I have to do?"

Kairn grinned. "Not much. Just get to the middle of the cemetery and back."

Zak peered through the iron gates. The mist made it hard to see. Through the drifting clouds of gray fog, he could just barely make out the first line of headstones in the darkness.

"Maybe he's too scared after all," said one of the boys.

"I'm not scared," Zak insisted.

The mist is so thick, he thought, that they'll hardly be able to see me ten meters beyond the gate. How will they know how far I've gone?

"It's a bet," he said with a gleam in his eye.

"Good." Kairn said. "All you have to do is go in and follow any path. They all lead to the center of the graveyard, where you'll see a large tomb. That's the Crypt of the Ancients. According to legend, that's where they buried Sycorax and her

son. Pick any of the graves around the crypt, stand right on top of it, and then come back."

The wrought-iron gate was locked. Zak watched in amazement as one of Kairn's smallest friends managed to squeeze through the bars of the gate. He went to a control panel on the inside wall and pressed some buttons. The gates swung open with a mournful squeal. Zak was about to step in when his new friend stopped him.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Kairn said with a grin. "You'll need this."

He handed Zak a small dagger. "What for?"

"You have to stick it in the ground in the middle of a grave near the Crypt of the Ancients. Tomorrow morning we'll go and see if it's there. For proof."

So much for his plan. Zak shivered.

"He looks scared!" someone teased.

"Just cold," Zak lied.

"Here, take this." Kairn gave Zak his thick cloak. "And you'll need this, too." He handed Zak a tiny glowrod to use for light.

Zak wrapped the heavy cloak around his shoulders and took a step into the graveyard, holding the glowrod in front of him. Its light barely penetrated the rolling mist. Row after row of tombstones vanished into the darkness before him. He took a few more steps. The headstones looked like a miniature city. A city of the dead.

"Good luck!" Kairn whispered behind him. "Oh, and watch out for the boneworms."

"Boneworms?" Zak hissed. "What are boneworms?"

"Nothing, really," Kairn chuckled. "Just wriggling creatures that come out of the ground. They'll suck the marrow from your bones if you stay still too long!

The iron gate slammed shut behind Zak.

Chapter Five

Zak looked around. He stood at the edge of the graveyard, which stretched out before him into the misty dark. Winding among the headstones, Zak saw several flagstone paths.

"The paths of the dead," Zak said to himself.

He stopped to look at the nearest grave marker. There were words carved on it in a language he couldn't read, but Zak could guess what it said. He whispered, "Here lies someone's loving mother, laid to rest by her adoring family."

Zak bit his lip. His parents had never been laid to rest.

Maybe that's why they were haunting him. Maybe that's why his parents had visited him twice in his dreams. He was sure they would visit him again.

Were they angry at him because he wasn't with them when they died? Because he and Tash hadn't given them a proper burial? That's what the Necropolitans believed.

But how could we? he thought. *The whole planet was destroyed.*

Zak's brain knew that, but his heart didn't. His heart was full of guilt because he had not been able to give his parents a funeral. He hadn't had a chance to say goodbye.

The Necropolitans are right, he thought. If you don't give the dead their respect, they do *come back to haunt you.*

A muffled crunching noise made Zak jump. He looked around but saw nothing in the dark. He shivered, and stopped to pull the heavy cloak tight around his shoulders. He had to get this over with and stop thinking about such creepy things.

Zak wasn't a thinker like Tash was. She read everything she could get her hands on, especially about the mysterious Jedi Knights. She talked about philosophy and even believed in a mystical power called the Force. Zak preferred to think with his hands, and was a born tinkerer. He would take apart a repulsor lift just to see if he could put it together again. When he wasn't building things, he was pulling daredevil stunts in the hologym or on his skimboard.

Maybe the stunts are getting a little out of hand, he thought, looking around the deserted cemetery.

The crunching sound came from directly beneath his feet.

Zak jumped almost a meter into the air. He looked down just in time to see a gleaming slimy white shape wriggle into the ground right where he had been standing.

Boneworms.

He remembered Kairn's warning and decided not to stand in one place for too long.

As he continued along the path, Zak admitted to himself what he had hinted to Tash. He had been skeptical of Tash and her all-powerful "Force," but he wanted to believe in the powers of the witch of Necropolis, and he hoped the Necropolitans were right. Then maybe his mother and father could come back. And then he'd be able to see them and say goodbye.

That was the real reason Zak had come to the graveyard.

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Despite the cobblestone path, Zak soon found himself lost in a maze of tombs and graves. The cemetery seemed to go on forever. Now and then Zak thought of turning back, but he didn't want to face the teasing his new friends would give him,

and he knew that he wouldn't be able to rest until he had at least tried the thing he was planning.

He walked for what seemed like an hour. But with all the twists and turns, he doubted that he was more than half a kilometer from the iron gates. Just as he was about to give up, he turned yet another corner and found himself before an enormous crypt. Its face was carved with rows of horned creatures that looked like krayt dragons, their leering faces warning him to stay away. A massive iron door was set in the wall of the crypt. Oddly enough, there was a strong lock on the outside of the door, as though the Necropolitans were trying to keep someone-or something-inside.

"This has got to be the place," Zak said to the darkness. "The Crypt of the Ancients."

He stood before the iron door and took a deep breath. "Urn, excuse me," he said out loud. He felt foolish, but so what? He'd do anything to bring his parents back. "My name is Zak Arranda. I'm not from Necropolis. I don't know if that matters. But my parents are gone. And I didn't get a chance to say goodbye." As he spoke, the feeling of foolishness was replaced by something else. Hot tears welled up in his eyes. "It's not fair that they were taken away from us! Especially not like that. We didn't even get a chance to see them! And now I miss them so much. I'd give anything to be able to see them again, just once. Not the way I see them in my nightmares, I mean really see them and talk to them. That's why I came here. If you really were a witch, if you really did have the power to bring back the dead, this is for a good cause. So won't you help me? Please?"

He waited.

Nothing happened.

The iron door remained as solid and cold as the moment before he spoke.

"Stupid idea...." Zak felt foolish once again. He sniffed back his last tear. "Thinking that something like this would work. Next

thing you know you'll be muttering about the Force and wishing you were a Jedi like Tash."

Zak remembered the bet with his friends. He looked around and saw that there were several smaller graves around the Crypt of the Ancients. He walked over to one and pulled out the small knife Kairn had given him. He hesitated for a moment when he realized that he would have to stand on the grave to stick the knife into the ground. What would it be like to stand on a grave? Zak took one careful step onto the burial plot. Was it his imagination or did the ground seem softer, squishier?

"It's your imagination," he told himself.

Still, how would he feel if someone stood on his grave?

"I wouldn't feel anything," he told himself.

Zak took another step. Now he was standing right on the grave. He couldn't help but imagine that his weight was pushing down on the ground, which was pushing down on a coffin, squeezing a lifeless bodyless than two meters beneath his feet. He waited, his heart pounding.

Nothing happened.

Of course nothing happened, he thought. You're being ridiculous.

Shrugging off his fear, Zak raised the knife high into the air, hesitated just a moment, and then plunged the knife into the ground.

For a moment Zak froze again. He heard a muffled sound below him. He turned quickly, ready to run. Just as he did, a long, low moan rose up from the beneath his feet. The ground shuddered.

And a hand reached up through the dirt.

Chapter Six

The moment he saw the gnarled white hand, Zak yelled in terror and started to run.

He took only a few steps before he saw the ground in front of him also tremble. Clods of soil shot up as wriggling arms forced their way to the surface, followed by the ghastly, grinning faces of two zombies. They twitched violently, but with every spasm they crawled farther out of the holes into which they'd been placed. Like Zak's nightmare vision of his parents, the creatures' pale skin hung limply from their bones. A few thin strands of dead gray hair clung to the sides of their heads. Inside one of the monsters' slack jaw, Zak could see a thick tongue lying like a dead worm.

Zak was so frightened by the two undead creatures before him that he'd forgotten about the first one. When he tried to run, he felt something incredibly strong grab the hem of his cloak, holding him back.

"Let go of me!" he shouted, wriggling free of the cloak. He let it fall to the ground behind him as he ran for his life.

Zak ran so fast that soon he had left the zombies behind, swallowed up in the great fog bank that hung over the cemetery. He had lost them.

Unfortunately he had lost himself, too.

Zak was no longer on the path he had taken to the Crypt of the Ancients. He didn't know which way to turn. All he could see were rows of headstones. There were thousands of them! Even worse, Zak had no idea when another dead body might spring out of its grave to grab him.

Zak's heart was racing. He couldn't believe what he had just seen. It was impossible, but it had happened. The dead had risen. Three people had dug themselves out of their own graves!

Could I have caused it? he wondered. Have I offended the dead?

Whether he had caused it or not, Zak wanted out of the cemetery.

"Help!" he shouted. "Someone help!"

A distant voice returned his cry. Zak ran toward the sound of the crying voice. "Who's there?" he called out. "Where are you?"

He heard the voice cry out again and thought he recognized it as Kairn's. Kairn had come to help him! Zak hurried toward the sound, keeping an eye out for any more of the terrifying creatures. They didn't seem to move very quickly, but he didn't want to end up in that cold, powerful grip again.

"Kairn! Kairn, is that you?"

"Zak! Where are you?" Kairn's voice came from out of the mist.

"Here! Here!" he called. "Where are you?"

"I'm over——aaagh!" Kairn's shout was cut off with a strangled cry.

"Kairn!" Zak ran even faster, forgetting where he was and vaulting over headstones as he raced to where he thought his friend must be.

A figure materialized out of the fog. For a fraction of a second, Zak's heart skipped a beat. Another zombie?

But the figure wasn't moving. It was about Kairn's size and shape, and it slumped against a large rounded headstone.

"Kairn, is that you?" Zak said as he slowed to a halt. The mist was so thick that he could hardly see the figure's face. He peered

closer. The eyes were wide with horror. The mouth was open, and something red dripped from one corner.

"Kairn!" Zak yelled.

"He's dead," a hard voice said. "And it looks like you're next."

Zak whirled around. There was the brutally scarred face he recognized from the hologram image Boba Fett had shown them: the face of Dr. Evazan.

Also known as Dr. Death.

Chapter Seven

Half of Dr. Evazan's face looked normal enough, but the other half was covered in scars and sores.

"I can't believe my luck," Evazan said, grinning from the undamaged side of his face. "It looks like I'll have two patients to care for this evening. Come on, boy, let the doctor have a look at you."

With lightning speed, one hand shot out and grabbed Zak by the hair.

"Ow!" Zak winced. "What did you do to Kairn?"

"The same thing I'll do to you in just a moment," said Dr. Evazan. Evazan's voice was chillingly calm. "I need subjects to work on if I'm going to continue my experiments. Healthy young subjects like him. And you."

Zak's head was tilted backward so he couldn't move it, forcing his mouth open. In his other hand, Dr. Evazan held some kind of blood-red berry. He crushed the berries in his hand so that the juice dripped out of his palm and into Zak's mouth.

"That's it," Evazan cooed. "Swallow the berry juice and it will all be over."

Zak tried not to swallow. The juice was bitter and made him gag. If he could only free himself!

"Evazan."

The voice that spoke was as cold as deepest space. The voice of Boba Fett.

Another criminal might have turned to look. Not Dr. Evazan. The moment his name was spoken, the evil doctor released Zak and dove for cover behind a headstone. A blaster bolt shattered the writing on the face of the grave marker.

Free, Zak spat out the vile-tasting juice and wiped his mouth. He ran to where Boba Fett stood as still and calm as a statue.

"Th-thanks!" Zak cried. "He was going to-"

"Silence." Fett didn't even look at Zak. Fett scanned the terrain and then nodded to himself, as though seeing something Zak could not. "Remain here."

"But we've got to get out of here! There are corpses coming out of the ground and..."

With one hand, Fett grabbed Zak by the shirt collar and pushed him gently but firmly to the ground until Zak's ear was pressed against the moist dirt.

"Remain here," Fett repeated. Holding his blaster at the ready, the armored killer strode silently off into the darkness.

Lying there without his borrowed cloak, afraid to move, Zak wondered if he was in shock. Kairn's lifeless body lay a few feet away, the dead eyes staring right into Zak.

To make things worse, somewhere nearby, the dead were waking.

Zak felt something brush across his cheek. He wiped his hand across his face and felt something wet and squishy stick to his hand. When he looked, he saw a plump, wriggling white worm wrap itself around his hand. One end of the boneworm pressed itself against Zak's skin, and he felt a sharp pain, as though something were gnawing at him. He gasped and flicked the boneworm away.

He wasn't sure how much more of this he could take. If he moved, he was afraid Boba Fett would shoot him. If he didn't move, one of the zombies might find him, or the boneworms might eat him alive.

Zak felt something else brush across his cheek, but when he reached for it, his hand touched the cold muzzle of a blaster.

Dr. Evazan had found him. "Get up!"

Without waiting for Zak to obey, Evazan hauled him up and pressed the blaster to his back. "You're my little passport out of this mess. Fett's a killer, but they say he's choosy about who he sends into the void. You will do as you're told, understand?"

Zak managed a nod.

Evazan held Zak before him like a shield as he stalked cautiously down the path. After only a moment, they saw Boba Fett's bullet-shaped helmet rise up before them in the gloom.

"Don't fire, Fett!" Dr. Evazan warned. "I have the boy with me. So unless you want innocent blood on your hands, don't make any sudden moves."

The figure of Boba Fett remained frozen.

"Ha!" Evazan sneered as he took a few cautious steps forward. "Perhaps your reputation is greater than your skills, bounty hunter. You let me backtrack you and get to the boy. You should have known that was my only chance. That was your last mistake."

Evazan took a few more steps toward the armored figure.

"Perhaps you're not really as good as they say, eh?" Another step.

"Perhaps I should destroy you right now. Put you out of your misery."

Evazan was close enough to touch Fett now. Fett stood before him, absolutely motionless. Still holding tightly onto Zak, Evazan reached forward and jabbed the bounty hunter with his blaster.

The armor, helmet and all, fell apart and clattered to the ground.

"Wh-?" Evazan started to say.

He never finished. A blaster bolt screamed through the air. Noise and light exploded around Zak, and beside him, Evazan screamed once, then slumped forward.

"Don't turn around." It was Boba Fett. Even without the helmet to filter his voice, the bounty hunter sounded cold as durasteel.

Zak realized that Boba Fett was standing behind him, completely unmasked. All he had to do was turn around, and he would see the face that few had ever seen, the face of the galaxy's most relentless hunter.

He didn't turn around.

"Pick up the helmet." Zak obeyed. "Hand it backward over your shoulder."

Zak kept his eyes forward and did as he was told. The helmet was snatched out of his hand. He heard an electronic snap as fittings locked into place. He knew then that he could turn around.

Boba Fett stood before him, wearing only a jumpsuit and his helmet, and holding his blaster.

"You tricked him," Zak said.

Boba Fett said nothing. The bounty hunter retrieved his armor and pulled a small holorecorder from his pocket. He bent down to examine Dr. Evazan's body. Zak watched. "Is he-?"

"Dead," Boba Fett said into the recorder. "Termination of Dr. Evazan, also known as Dr. Death, confirmed by holoscan with medical uplink. Payment now due from twelve planetary systems." Fett snapped the recorder off and tucked it back into its pocket. Then, with smooth efficiency, he began to put his armor back on.

Zak stammered, "He-he was going to kill me. You saved my life. Thanks."

The bounty hunter spared the slightest glance. "Thanks are inappropriate. You were incidental."

Suddenly Boba Fett straightened and drew his blaster faster than the eye could follow. He seemed to be listening. Zak listened, too, but at first he heard nothing. Then, finally, the sound of approaching footsteps reached his ears.

"Zak! Zak!"

He heard familiar voices call out through the mist. "Tash! Uncle Hoole! Over here! We have to help Kairn!" he called back.

It took a few more blind shouts, but finally Tash, Deevee, and Hoole found Zak. They were accompanied by a small band of Necropolitans led by Pylum, the Master of Cerements, who looked furious.

By this time Boba Fett was once again wearing his armored shell. The bounty hunter stood calmly by as Zak ran to his sister and uncle. "He's dead! Uncle Hoole, Kairn's dead!"

"Zak, what is going on? What are you doing out here?" Hoole demanded.

Zak shivered. His fear was wearing off, and he realized he was very cold. "I came out here on a dare, Uncle Hoole. But that doesn't matter! Kairn's dead! And I saw something-something you're not going to believe. The Necropolitans are right! The dead are coming out of their graves!"

Hoole's brow wrinkled. "What are you babbling about? We heard blaster fire."

"That was him," Zak said, pointing to Boba Fett. "He killed Dr. Evazan."

"Who?" Hoole asked.

"Dr. Evazan. The wanted man he was hunting. Him."

Zak pointed to Evazan's lifeless body.

"I tracked down a bounty," Boba Fett said. "Evazan is dead. Now I will take the body."

"You cannot do that," Pylum protested. "That would be a terrible violation of our laws. The dead-even criminals-must be buried immediately, otherwise the Curse of Sycorax will be on all our heads. We will give this body the proper ceremonies."

Boba Fett stared coldly at Pylum for a moment. Zak had the distinct impression that the bounty hunter was trying to decide whether or not to vaporize Pylum with his blaster.

Apparently Fett decided he wasn't worth the trouble. "Very well. I have recorded the death, and you are all witnesses. If I do

not collect my bounty from the proper authorities, I will return to collect it from you."

With those words the armored assassin turned and walked away until he was swallowed up by the darkness.

Meanwhile Pylum had examined Kairn's body, especially the red liquid on the side of his mouth. The Master of Cerements stood up and shook his head. "Cryptberries. They grow around the graveyards, and they are extremely dangerous. The boy has poisoned himself with cryptberries."

"He didn't poison himself," Zak said. "It was Evazan. He tried to do the same thing to me. And before that, I saw corpses crawling out of their graves! "

"I warned you," Pylum said. "The dead are rising! The Curse of Sycorax is real!"

"Ridiculous," Hoole snorted. "Show me these empty graves."

Zak was frightened. He could see that no one believed him. They returned to the Crypt of the Ancients, led by Pylum. Hoole and the others shone glowrods all around the crypt.

But the graves were undisturbed.

Chapter Eight

"That's impossible," Zak whispered. "There were creatures. Zombies! Dig up the graves. You'll see that they're empty."

"We cannot do that!" Pylum argued. "That would be the worst crime of all. The dead would never forgive us."

"But you've got to believe me!"

"Calm down, Zak," his uncle insisted. "Tell us exactly what happened."

Zak sighed. "I came into the graveyard on a dare. I was supposed to stick a knife in one of the graves to prove I'd gone all the way to the center of the cemetery. But when I did, the bodies started crawling out of the ground!" Zak could tell that no one believed him. "At first I didn't see anything, but I heard noises coming from underground."

"The ground settling, most likely," Deevee said, tapping the dirt with one metallic foot. "All the soil here is loose from so many burials."

"But then I saw them... dead-white shapes moving in the darkness."

"Boneworms," Deevee suggested. "You must have seen boneworms crawling on the topsoil."

Zak was growing frustrated. "Oh? Then what about my cloak? Kairn loaned me his cloak, and one of the zombies tore it right off my shoulders. It should be around here somewhere."

"Here it is," Hoole said. He held a glowrod over the dropped cloak. "And here's your explanation."

The edge of the cloak was pinned to the ground by the knife Zak had stuck into the grave. "You must have caught the edge of the cloak when you stuck the knife in. You only thought someone was grabbing you."

"But I saw them!" Zak insisted.

Pylum cut in on their conversation. The Necropolitan jabbed one finger at Zak while speaking to Hoole. "It does not matter what the boy thinks did or did not happen. The fact is, he intruded on sacred ground. He has broken the ancient laws and must be punished in the ancient ways."

The Shi'ido's frown deepened. "I'm afraid I can't allow that. Zak shouldn't have come in here, but he didn't know anything about your laws, and he didn't mean any harm."

"The strangers are right, Pylum," one of the other Necropolitans said. "We can't punish offworlders for laws they don't know about."

Pylum disagreed. "This boy's mischief led to the death of one of our own. "

"Evazan killed him!" Zak said.

"Will you believe this boy?" Pylum asked his companions. "Or the laws of Necropolis?"

"Let them go, Pylum," said another Necropolitan. "This boy's been through enough for one evening."

Outnumbered, Pylum could do nothing. But he threw Zak an angry glare that said, You haven't heard the last of me.

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Hoole led his niece and nephew away from the cemetery. A solemn crowd followed them, carrying the bodies of Dr. Evazan and Kairn.

Tash Arranda worried all the way home, and stayed worried even after Hoole and Deevee had seen her and her brother to their rooms. Zak hadn't said a word, and he was silent all the way back to his room, where he locked the door behind him.

The next morning, Zak stayed in his room during breakfast. For Zak, who usually ate anything and everything in sight, that was a sure sign something was wrong.

Tash decided to tease him out of his sullen mood and knocked on his door. He opened it with a scowl.

"Hey, rancor breath," she said.

"Hey."

"What's this? No comebacks? No insults? You're slowing down on me, blaster brain."

Zak's face darkened. "I'm not in the mood, Tash, so leave me alone."

She tried her best to sound cheery. "Nope. Can't do it. You're my brother, and it's my job to see that you get insulted as often as possible."

Zak slapped a button on the wall, and the door shut in Tash's face.

Wrong approach, Tash decided.

She wondered whether he was simply in shock from the death of his new friend. She could understand if he was upset about Kairn. It was terrible when anyone died, but to have it happen to such a happy, friendly person was even worse. And he was Zak's first real friend in awhile. It made sense. Still, it wasn't like Zak to shut himself away when he was upset, even at something like that.

Maybe he was angry that no one believed his story about the zombies. But how could anyone believe him? Who had ever heard of the dead coming back to life? Besides, even if Zak

believed his own story, he was too stubborn and independent to let someone else's opinion depress him. He'd just ignore them.

It had to be something else about his adventure in the cemetery. But what?

Deevee came out of Uncle Hoole's room and stopped beside Tash. "Still no luck in exhuming our buried young Zak?"

"Exhume," Tash said, ignoring Deevee's poor taste in jokes. "That means to dig up, right?"

"Ah, I see our lessons are paying off at last," Deevee replied.

"This is no time for jokes, Deevee."

The droid gave his mechanical version of a shrug. "Not to worry. Before you know it, Zak will rise up like the dead of the Necropolitan legends. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to continue Master Hoole's search for a suitable ship."

Tash repeated Deevee's words to herself "Like the dead of the Necropolitan legends." Like Zak, Tash had heard the stories about people who visited the Crypt of the Ancients, hoping to bring people back from the dead.

Is that what Zak had wanted to do?

"I guess it didn't work, did it?" she called through the door. "Trying to bring Mom and Dad back, I mean."

There was a pause. Then the door opened and Zak let her in. "You didn't go into that cemetery just because someone dared you, did you?" Tash guessed. "You went in because you thought there was some way to bring Mom and Dad back. "

Zak reddened. "Yeah. Pretty stupid, huh?"

"I don't know," she said. "If I thought there was some way to get them back, I'd try it, too. But, Zak, even Kairn said that story's just a legend."

It's not a legend, Zak thought. I saw it happen. The dead can come back!

However, he knew Tash wouldn't believe him. She and Deevee and Uncle Hoole thought he was imagining things. Out loud, he said, "Maybe you're right, Tash."

Tash grinned. "Hey, I'm always right!"

Tash left Zak's room feeling like she'd helped him-at least a little. He was obviously very bothered. What had started as one scary nightmare had turned into a series of delusions about walking corpses. But she was confident that he would snap out of it.

Tash headed for her room down the hall. As she did, she passed by Uncle Hoole's room. The door was closed, but the sound of conversation leaked through.

Conversation? Hadn't Deevee gone off to look at starships? Who would Uncle Hoole be talking to?

Curious, Tash listened closely, and her eyes grew wide with surprise.

"In any case, that is my proposal," came the voice of Uncle Hoole.

"I'll consider it," replied another voice.

The voice of Boba Fett.

Chapter Nine

By midday Tash was kicking herself for not opening Uncle Hoole's door right then and there. But she had been too surprised. Why was a respectable scientist like Uncle Hoole talking to a notorious bounty hunter like Boba Fett?

By the time she had recovered her wits, the voices were approaching the door, and Tash had barely scrambled around a corner before Hoole's door slid open. She caught only a glimpse of the armored assassin striding out of Hoole's quarters.

They had to attend Kairn's funeral that afternoon. "The funeral rites of Necropolis are most impressive," Deevee said on the way to the cemetery. "I wish I could attend! Unfortunately my search for a reliable starship dealer continues. Otherwise I wouldn't miss the funeral. It should be most interesting to watch."

"Deevee!" Tash scolded. "This isn't a field trip. It's a solemn occasion. "

That it was.

A great many people turned out for the funeral. Zak and Tash weren't surprised that Kairn had so many friends.

At the cemetery gates, the crowd gathered around an elegantly carved coffin. Necropolitan symbols were carved into its lid, and

Zak noticed that although the coffin lid was shut, there was a large bolt on it that had not yet been locked.

Next to the coffin, a small, closed tent had been erected. Zak could not see inside, but he heard someone sobbing.

"Uncle Hoole, what's that tent for?" he asked quietly.

Hoole replied, "Kairn's parents are in there. The Necropolitans believe that if the dead see the living mourn, they might come back. In order to prevent that, the family of the departed live in seclusion for seven days. No one sees them."

A day ago Zak would have shaken his head at such superstitious nonsense. But he now knew the dead could come back. He had seen it.

The muttering of the crowd stopped as Pylum, the Master of Cerements, stopped before the coffin. The sour-faced Necropolitan stood at the edge of the cemetery and delivered a long speech about the dangers of disturbing the dead.

"The old ways are the true ways," Pylum intoned. "The dead must be respected. The dead must be left undisturbed. The alternative is disaster. That is the way of Necropolis."

As Pylum talked, Zak couldn't help feeling a pang of guilt. His parents had had no funeral. No one had offered them a show of mourning, even in private. No one had done anything for them.

No wonder they haunted his dreams.

Pylum raised his voice, snapping Zak out of his reverie.

"May the spirit of Sycorax receive this departed being in peace. May Kairn, who is gone from the living, remain now forever in the city of the dead!"

With that, Pylum grabbed the heavy bolt attached to the coffin, and with a dramatic flourish, he slammed it into place, sealing the coffin forever.

From behind the curtains of the pavilion, Zak heard a low, sad wail.

The crowd followed as Pylum led the coffin bearers-some of whom Zak recognized from the night before-into the cemetery.

Zak noticed that the Necropolitans were very careful to stay on the paths and to avoid the ground near the graves.

The caravan moved silently until they reached an open grave. It was as if they were frightened to speak too loudly, afraid that even a whisper might disturb the dead. Silently, the coffin-bearers lowered Kairn's coffin into the grave and slowly shoveled dirt over it.

As the mourners walked out of the cemetery, Zak passed by a freshly dug grave. The gravestone was written in the Necropolitan language and in Basic, the common language of the galaxy. It read: "Here lies Dr. Evazan. May he find the peace he did not give his patients."

That, Zak thought, is putting it lightly.

They returned to the hostel to find Deevee waiting for them.

"It took great effort, and I think I actually used a fraction of my computer brain to do it, but I've located a dealer in starships who had several vessels for sale," Deevee said.

Tash and Zak soon found themselves trailing behind their Shi'ido uncle and his droid assistant as they wound their way through the avenues of Necropolis, on their way to the starship dealer.

Although the sun was out, Necropolis was covered by the same feeling of darkness that had filled it at night. The old stone buildings were so tall and wide that very little sunlight reached the streets, and down among the walkways it seemed like midnight at noon.

Tash watched Uncle Hoole as he walked in front of her. She had been suspicious of him for some time. He was supposed to be an anthropologist, devoting his scientific mind to the study of different species and cultures across the galaxy. But although they had lived with him for six months, he still had not told them anything about himself-not even his first name. And even though he knew an awful lot about science, he acted like no scientist Tash had ever heard of.

He had no laboratory. He ran no experiments. Whenever they arrived on a new planet, he often went out on midnight errands and refused to tell anyone where he was going.

Not long ago Tash and Zak had had a run-in with the gangster Smada the Hutt. The vile crime lord had somehow known Hoole. Hoole had claimed that he had once refused to work for the Hutt gangster, and Tash had believed him. But at the same time, Smada had hinted that Hoole was involved in some shadowy schemes-that maybe he even had ties to the Empire. And now Hoole was working with Boba Fett, one of the most vicious killers in the galaxy. It was too much of a coincidence.

These thoughts filled Tash's mind. She was so preoccupied that before she knew it, they had arrived at an immense dockyard at the edge of Necropolis. The enormous yard was a weird mixture of old and new. Ancient stone buildings surrounded it, but the open space was filled with modern, automated maintenance equipment and sleek, modern starships.

"Welcome, welcome, welcome!"

A Necropolitan greeted them with wide-open arms and an even wider grin. He walked right up to Hoole and put his arm around the scientist's shoulder. "Welcome to Meego's Starship Emporium, where we don't bring the stars to you. We bring you to the stars! I'm Meego. What can I do for you?"

Uncle Hoole opened his mouth to speak, but Meego continued. "Wait, lemme guess. You're looking for a family star cruiser. Something you and the kids can tool around in. Visit the Hologram Fun World, maybe do some sight-seeing in the Outer Rim. I've got just the thing. Right this way!"

He tried to drag Hoole toward a sleek new star cruiser that looked expensive. Hoole stood as still as a statue. "That particular ship may be out of my price range."

Meego was undaunted. "On a budget? Aren't we all? But I'm sure we can work out some financing. And believe me, this is the

kind of ship that'll pay for itself in no time. Besides, with an energetic family like yours you'll-"

"Need the room?" Tash interrupted.

"Exactly," said Meego, still talking to Hoole. "And I can tell from your attitude that you're not just a tourist. You travel for a living, am I right? You'll need-"

"To be comfortable," Tash ended.

"Right again. And don't forget about-"

"Dependability? Low cost of repairs? Style?" Tash guessed. The dealer looked annoyed. Tash had somehow figured out everything he was about to say.

Zak recognized the look on the dealer's face. "Don't mind her," he said. "She does that a lot."

Tash only smiled. Her little gift came easy with this ship dealer-maybe because his thoughts were so shallow.

"How... delightful," the dealer sputtered. He seemed irritated that she had interrupted his speech and tried to get back on track. "Well, come on, it won't cost you anything to look..."

The dealer's mouth ran faster than a hyperdrive engine. Zak groaned inwardly. He was only thirteen, and he still had a lot to learn about starships. But he knew enough to see that the starship the salesman was pushing was all looks and no power. His eyes wandered over to a ship tucked in an unlit corner of the dockyard.

"Now that," Zak said aloud, "is a ship. What about that one?"

"That looks like a used ship," Tash pointed out. The salesman winced. "We prefer the term 'preowned.' We just acquired it from its previous owner, who is, urn, deceased. I'm afraid it's not yet available for sale."

The fast-talking salesman managed to lure Uncle Hoole over to the new ship, but Zak didn't follow. His feet turned automatically in the direction his eyes were looking. Zak recognized the "pre-owned" ship from star catalogs. It was an Arakyd Helix Interceptor. Even docked, the Interceptor looked like an angry bird of prey. Its forward hold stuck out like a

wicked beak, and its hull curved downward like sloping wings. Black streaks ran along its side and bottom where it had been burned making rushed entries into the atmosphere. Its landing gear looked battered from landings and takeoffs that were too fast.

But all that was meaningless. Sleek, durachrome exteriors were just candy for the eyes. Smart pilots looked at one thing: the engine, and the engine on this ship was...

"Prime," Zak said to himself. "That's an Incom GBp-629 with a backup hyperdrive motivator and double-reinforced power couplings." Which meant, simply, that the ship could go very, very fast.

Zak walked around the ship, examining the fittings and power cable connections. Most of the fine points were too technical for him, but he had studied enough to know that some of the modifications on that ship were illegal. He had seen that kind of custom fitting on only one other ship: the *Millennium Falcon*.

Which means this ship belonged to a smuggler... or a pirate, he decided. Or at least to someone who needed to make a lot of fast getaways.

Zak wondered what the interior looked like. If it was a smuggler ship, it would have all sorts of modifications, maybe even a high-powered weapons system. He looked over his shoulder to make sure he wasn't being watched, then slapped the hatch controls. The portal slid open with a soft hiss. Zak stepped onboard.

The first thing he noticed was the advanced computer system. The second thing he noticed was a long corridor leading to the cockpit.

The third thing he noticed was Dr. Evazan, the dead Dr. Evazan, running down the corridor toward him.

Chapter Ten

Dr. Evazan was alive!

That was impossible. Boba Fett had shot him. Dr. Evazan had been buried. Zak had seen it with his own eyes.

But if Zak was going to believe what his eyes had seen last night, he had to believe them now. And right now his eyes told him that a dead man had come back to life and was charging toward him.

Zak was frozen in fear. Evazan's scarred face, his angry sneer, and his lightning speed were now even more terrifying. Zak could only stand there as Dr. Death reached out for him.

But instead of grabbing him, Evazan gave a sudden, violent twitch that shook his whole body. Then he snarled, shoved Zak out of the way, and bolted through the ship's hatchway, carrying something in his free hand. Evazan disappeared almost instantly as he ducked behind the landing gear of a nearby ship.

Finally Zak unfroze. He ignored the gangway ramp and leaped out of the starship. He hit the ground running and dashed across the dockyard to the others, shouting at the top of his lungs, "Evazan! Dr. Death! He's here. He's here!"

His frantic cries stopped Meego in midsentence. The salesman, along with Hoole, Tash, and Deevee, turned to look at the out-of-breath boy. "Ev-Evazan!" Zak gasped one more time.

"You are interrupting," Hoole said calmly. "Why?"

"I saw him. I saw Evazan."

"The Dr. Evazan?" Deevee asked.

Zak nodded. "Yes-scarred face and all."

Hoole looked annoyed. "If I recall correctly, this is the same Dr. Evazan who was buried today. In other words, the one who is dead?"

"He is! I mean he was! I mean..." Zak paused to catch his breath and saw the look on Tash's face. He realized that he must sound foolish. He tried to think of some way to prove what had happened.

"Perhaps I should excuse myself for a moment and let you four talk," the salesman said.

"No, wait!" Zak had just remembered something. "I saw Evazan running out of that ship back there. He was carrying something! Look over the ship and I'm sure you'll find something missing."

The salesman smiled in sympathy but said, "I'm afraid I can't help. You see, the reason that ship is unavailable is that it hasn't been overhauled yet. My technicians haven't even been inside, so I have no idea what might have been onboard."

***

No one spoke until they reached the hostel. They sat in the hostel's common room where they had seen Boba Fett the night before. But now the room was empty. Zak sat with his back to the wall, staring glumly out one of the small windows onto the darkening street.

The hostel was a cavernous place with high ceilings and stone pillars carved into the shape of giants holding up the roof. Their voices echoed so loudly that they found themselves whispering.

"Zak," Uncle Hoole began slowly. "I have tried to be understanding. I know that you have been having bad dreams about your parents, and that is quite understandable. But I

believe your sudden concern about-forgive me for being so blunt-about death is becoming an obsession."

Zak knew arguing with Hoole wouldn't do any good. He tried to keep eye contact with his uncle, but the Shi'ido's stare made him nervous. Every now and then Zak looked away, out through the window to the dark streets beyond.

"We have hardly been here a full day and you've already offended a local custom by entering a cemetery. You've snuck out of your room with a boy who poisoned himself, and you have associated with a known bounty hunter."

Zak had stopped listening to his uncle. Had he seen something moving outside the window? "Furthermore, you've become obsessed with this idea that the dead can return. I was fond of your parents, and I miss them, too, but you must accept that they are gone now. They cannot come back any more than this Dr. Evazan can."

Zak hardly heard what Hoole was saying. There was definitely something out in the shadows. It was a man-size shape. It shuffled one way, then the other, as if trying to get a good view of the room through the transparisteel. The figure pressed a little closer, and for a moment the light from the room spilled onto its face.

It was Dr. Evazan.

"There!" Zak shouted, pointing over Uncle Hoole's shoulder.

Everyone turned to look.

But Evazan had vanished.

"What?" Tash asked. "What was it?"

Zak opened his mouth, then shut it quickly. He wasn't about to make any more claims in front of his uncle. "Nothing," he lied. "Just a shadow."

Zak could tell that Hoole didn't believe him. As he excused himself and went to his room, Zak decided that he couldn't blame his uncle or Deevee. But he at least hoped that Tash might believe him.

He told her so as they went to their rooms. "You're the expert on weird things," he told her. "Don't you think this really might be happening?"

"I believe that you believe it, Zak. But not even Jedi Knights can do what you're describing."

"But I know what I saw," Zak insisted. "Maybe Dr. Evazan faked his death so Boba Fett would stop tracking him."

"Maybe," Tash considered. "But it's pretty hard to fake your own burial after you're dead. He was put in a grave, remember?"

Zak nodded. "I know. But I did see him."

"I'm sure you saw someone, Zak. But it couldn't have been Dr. Evazan."

Zak knew Tash was right. It was impossible that Evazan could be alive. He had taken a blaster shot right in the back. Boba Fett had examined the corpse thoroughly, and the Necropolitans had put him in the ground.

Of course, it was just as impossible that zombies crawled out of their graves, but Zak had seen that, too.

Or had he?

Could he have imagined it? With all that mist and darkness, he hadn't actually gotten a good look at the zombies.

But what about Evazan? Hadn't he just seen Evazan's face at the window? Zak shuddered. The image was still in his mind. To make himself feel better, he hit the Lock button on his automatic window. The glass closed and sealed itself shut with a snap. The sound made Zak feel safe and secure.

He stood at his window and looked out on the twisted stone tops of the city buildings. Necropolis was a dark place. He had come to this planet already bothered by nightmares, and he had heard about nothing but graves and witches and cemeteries since the moment he arrived. Then, to make a friend so quickly and to have that friend taken away just as fast... maybe it was getting to him.

Someone had definitely been onboard the used starship. Zak didn't think he was that crazy. Maybe it was a thief. There were

lots of criminals with scarred faces. Maybe Zak's fear had triggered something in his brain that made him see Evazan's face on someone else.

Zak lay down on his bed, staring at the ceiling, convincing himself that his imagination had been running overtime. Anyone would have the jitters after going through what he had experienced over the last twenty-four hours.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

The sudden, sharp raps shook the windowpane, and shook Zak even harder. He sat bolt upright.

In the window, a figure seemed to hang in midair. It was thin and bony, almost skeletal. Its jaw hung loosely from its head as it banged on the window again.

I'm dreaming, Zak thought. I jell asleep on the bed while I was thinking, and now I'm having another nightmare.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

The zombie acted just like those from his other dreams, moaning at him through the window. Zak didn't cry out. He wondered whether he was awake or dreaming.

The zombie started to pry the window open.

It must have been incredibly strong. Zak watched as it jammed its fingers into the tiny crack where the automatic window touched the stone wall. Somehow it found a hold and started to pull.

The window opened a fraction of a centimeter.

This must be a dream, Zak thought. Not even a Wookiee could pry open those automatic windows.

The zombie pulled, and the window opened a tiny bit wider.

Zak felt his heart start to pound.

The zombie pulled harder, its bony arms trembling under the strain. The automatic window started to whine as it tried to return to its closed position. The zombie pulled hard, and the window opened another centimeter. But that was all. With a demanding screech the automated window broke from the

zombie's hand and slammed shut. The undead creature grunted and fell away from the window.

Heart still thumping in his chest, Zak waited a moment longer. Nothing else happened. He nodded to himself. That was the way to handle a nightmare.

***

He woke up the next morning feeling a little better. He was proud of the way he'd handled the nightmare. He hadn't given in to his fear; he hadn't cried out for help. He didn't know why the dream hadn't included his mom and dad, but maybe that was a good sign, too.

Zak yawned and stretched. His room was stuffy since he'd sealed the window shut. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Zak went to the window and pressed a button. The glass whooshed open.

Then Zak saw it.

Three small strips of pale dead skin clung to the edge of the window.

Chapter Eleven

It hadn't been a dream. A zombie had tried to break into his room, and he had just lain there!

Zak shuddered, trying not to think about what might have happened if the undead creature had gotten inside. Worse yet, he wondered why the zombie had come after him in the first place.

But he knew the answer.

He had gone into the cemetery and stood on a grave.

He had disturbed the dead.

Zak didn't know what to do. He had already tried to tell Tash. He knew it wouldn't do any good to tell Uncle Hoole. Who could he talk to that might believe him?

Zak went to the comm unit built into his room wall.

Necropolis might have the look of an ancient city, but it possessed all the conveniences of modern galactic life. He punched up an information system and found Pylum's calling code, which he entered into the unit.

"Yes?" He heard Pylum's stern voice break through the static, and then a small image of the Necropolitan's face appeared on the comm unit's screen.

"Urn, hello, my name is Zak. I was the one from the cemetery the other night..."

"Of course." Pylum's voice and face hardened. "The offworlder who violated our cemetery." He waited.

"I think... I think I know what you mean about the Curse of Sycorax." Zak swallowed. As calmly as he could, he reminded the Master of Cerements of what he'd seen in the graveyard. Then he told Pylum about the undead creature at his window and, finally, about the visit to the shipyard.

Pylum raised an eyebrow. "You believe you saw Dr. Evazan? The being that bounty hunter killed?"

"Yes," Zak said. Did Pylum believe him? "I saw him twice. Could he... Could he have come back, too?"

Pylum sounded upset. "The Curse of Sycorax knows no boundaries. Anything is possible. But this seems quite serious."

Zak was relieved. Someone finally believed him! Even if it was Pylum. "Can you help me? What should I do?"

"I will help you," Pylum replied, "but I must prepare. The ancient curse is not a thing to be taken lightly. I will send someone to you this evening. In the meantime it might be better if you kept this to yourself. Have you told anyone?"

"My sister, but she didn't believe me."

Pylum nodded. "Unbelievers are the most dangerous, because they cause problems without helping to solve them." The Master of Cerements paused. "I'm glad you've realized the truth, Zak. I believe I can help you, but it's important that you keep what you've seen to yourself. If word spreads it could cause a panic in the city. As Master of Cerements, I must know for certain what has happened before I make an announcement. Wait there. I will send someone." Pylum touched a button, and the screen went dark.

Zak spent the day on pins and needles. There was nothing to do-the boys he had met were all in mourning over Kairn, so there was no one to show him around the city. Uncle Hoole had apparently decided to buy the sleek new starship the slick dealer had pushed on him, and spent the day arranging the data work.

And Tash seemed preoccupied with Uncle Hoole himself. At first Zak was too distracted to pay attention, but by the afternoon, with nothing better to do but sit in the hostel and watch old holograms, Zak went to her room and listened as she told him about Hoole's meeting with Boba Fett.

"But Hoole's an anthropologist," Zak replied. "He's a scientist. What would he want from a bounty hunter?"

Tash shook her head. "I don't know. But there's definitely more to our uncle than meets the eye. And we're going to find out what it is."

"How are you going to find out?" Zak asked. "Uncle Hoole won't even tell us his first name."

It was true. But Tash only shrugged. "I'm not going to ask Uncle Hoole. I have another plan."

Boba Fett's ship was not hard to find. The maintenance workers at the dockyard had all gotten a glimpse of the intimidating killer, and knew exactly where his ship was. It sat on its landing berth like a poisonous dinko ready to spring. The ship's engines hummed. When they had first arrived, Tash thought the bounty hunter was about to launch, but that had been almost an hour ago. She figured that Fett always kept his ship primed for launch, just in case he had to make a quick getaway.

Her plan was simple. Since she couldn't ask Uncle Hoole, and she knew she couldn't ask Boba Fett, she would follow the bounty hunter to see what he was doing.

"If he ever comes out of his ship," she muttered to herself.

She lurked in the shadows of a building near the docking bay, where she could see the bounty hunter's ship. Beside her, Zak was growing anxious. Pylum had said he would send someone to the hostel, and evening had begun to fall. He was beginning to think that either the bounty hunter was not on board, or he never planned to leave his ship.

Zak became impatient. He didn't care about Boba Fett, and he had more important things to do than to discover Hoole's

personal secrets. He decided he had to get back to the hostel so he could meet Pylum. "Tash," he began, "I- "

"Shh! There he is!"

The hatchway to the ship had opened. For a second no one appeared, as though the occupant was scanning for any lurking danger. Finally Boba Fett exited from the ship and strode down one of the numerous alleyways.

"Come on!" Tash whispered, and took off after the bounty hunter. Reluctantly Zak followed.

The alleyway curved into one of the city's main streets. Turning onto it, Boba Fett walked in a straight line down the middle of the avenue. People got out of his way.

Zak and Tash followed as stealthily as they could. Even though it was getting late, there were still a few pedestrians on the street, and it was easy for Zak and Tash to remain out of sight as they followed their target. Boba Fett never looked back. He seemed unaware that he was being followed. Still, Tash thought they should take no chances. They dashed from hiding places behind pillars to covered doorways set in the sides of buildings, trying to remain as invisible as possible as they shadowed the bounty hunter.

After a few minutes, they reached a quieter section of town. There were no pedestrians at all. Zak recognized the neighborhood right away. They were getting closer to the cemetery.

The alleyways became as tight and narrow as a maze, and Zak and Tash soon lost sight of the bounty hunter as he turned a corner.

They hurried to catch up, but as they turned the same corner, they found themselves at an intersection of two streets. There was no sign of Boba Fett.

"Which way do you think he went?" Zak wondered.

"Your guess is as good as mine," Tash answered. "Why don't you take a quick look down that road, and I'll look down the other one. Then we'll meet back here in a minute."

Zak hesitated. He had to get back to the hostel. "Tash, I-"

"Come on, Zak!" Tash interrupted. "We might lose him."

She hurried down one of the two streets. Zak shook his head. When Tash locked onto something, she was as stubborn as a dewback.

He hurried down the avenue on the left. He hadn't gone far before the street divided again. Zak was at a loss until a figure passed beneath a faint glowpanel farther down one of the two lanes.

Quietly Zak hurried after the figure. He wondered if Boba Fett would even speak to him, or what the bounty hunter would say if he knew the man he'd killed had come back to life.

The figure ahead of him was moving slowly, and Zak easily closed the distance between them. He closed the gap just as the figure passed beneath another glowpanel, and Zak got a better look at him.

It wasn't Boba Fett.

It was Kairn.

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Meanwhile Tash hurried down her chosen lane for two hundred meters. There were no side streets and no sign of Boba Fett. She decided he must not have come this way and turned back. She arrived back at the intersection and waited, but Zak didn't show up. She waited a little longer, then called softly, "Zak? Zak, are you there?"

"Zak is not here, but I am."

Tash turned. Boba Fett was behind her, with a blaster in his hand.

Chapter Twelve

"What did you do with Zak?" Tash demanded.

"You were following me," the bounty hunter stated. "Why?"

Maybe it was his voice, maybe it was the blaster in his hand, or maybe it was the fact that his face was hidden beneath his helmet, but Tash found Boba Fett unnerving. She stammered, "B-Because I saw you at the hostel the other day. T-Talking to my uncle."

"The Shi'ido," Fett stated flatly.

"Yes. I know he spoke to you, but he wouldn't tell me why. I wanted to find out by following you." Boba Fett said flatly, "You were clumsy. I was on to you the minute I left my ship. Your clumsiness saved your life. If you had any skill at shadowing people, I might have mistaken you for a professional and taken you out immediately." He slowly holstered his blaster. "I expected your brother to be with you. I want him."

Tash tried to overcome her fear. Boba Fett uses his reputation to intimidate people, she thought. And he uses that helmet to hide what he's thinking.

"We split up," she said, keeping the nervousness out of her voice. "We lost you and separated to find you."

The cold voice spoke again. "I hear your brother says he saw Evazan again. Explain."

Tash was surprised. "How did you know that?"

"Explain."

Tash swallowed. Was Boba Fett angry at Zak? Did he think Zak would hurt his reputation? "Leave Zak alone. Whatever he says is our business."

"I want details. I killed Evazan. How could your brother have seen him?"

Tash gathered her courage. The bounty hunter had asked her a question, and it gave her an advantage. She had information he apparently needed. "Let's make a deal. I'll tell you what Zak saw, if you answer a question of mine."

"No promises. Tell me."

"Promise," she challenged.

The bounty hunter said nothing. He waited.

Tash tried to outwait him, but it was impossible. Boba Fett was like a statue. Finally she blurted out, "All right, I'll tell you!"

Tash quickly told the bounty hunter what Zak had seen aboard the starship. When she was finished, Fett simply nodded.

"Now I get to ask a question," Tash asked.

"It will be a waste of breath."

Tash asked anyway. "What does Uncle Hoole want from you? Does he want you to kill someone?"

"Stay out of your uncle's business. You don't want to know about it." The killer paused. "And if you know what's good for you, you'll stay out of my business as well."

Boba Fett pressed a small control on his wrist and the jetpack he wore ignited in a burst of flame. With a roar, the bounty hunter shot up into the air and was out of sight, leaving Tash alone on the dark street.

***

Zak rubbed his eyes and looked again. The person walking down the street was definitely the same boy he'd met his first day in Necropolis.

"Kairn!" Zak yelled happily. "You're alive!"

Kairn didn't stop moving, so Zak ran to catch up with him. Only when Zak stood right in front of him did the young Necropolitan seem to notice. "Kairn, it's me. Zak."

Kairn blinked. His skin was pale, as though he'd been very ill, and his eyes looked glassy and lifeless. They reminded Zak of black holes.

"Zak," Kairn said slowly. "Good to see you."

"It's good to see you! What happened? Was it all a mistake?"

Kairn blinked very slowly. "Mistake?"

Zak laughed. He was so happy to see his friend. "You were dead, or at least you looked dead. The other night in the cemetery, remember?"

"Oh. No. There was no mistake."

"You mean - - ?"

Kairn smiled a lifeless smile. "That's right. I died, Zak. I was dead." Kairn's body twitched.

Zak sputtered, "Then, it really is true? The dead can come back? But how? "

"I can answer your questions if you come with me. I must go to the graveyard again."

Kairn started walking down the street.

Zak didn't know what to do. He knew he should go back and meet Tash. He also knew Pylum had expected him to wait at the hostel. But if he left now, he might lose Kairn, and he refused to let that happen. If he was going to get anyone to believe him, he needed proof-and now his proof was walking away. Zak hurried until he was shoulder to shoulder with Kairn. "I'm right with you."

Kairn said nothing as they walked. Whatever had happened had definitely changed him. His skin looked sallow and unhealthy. He walked slowly, like he was trudging through mud, and every now and then his body shook with a violent twitch. But he didn't look like the zombies Zak had seen in his dreams.

He looked like he'd been ill, but he did not look like the walking dead.

Kairn's personality had changed along with his appearance. He didn't speak unless Zak asked him a question, and even then Zak had to ask it two or three times. It seemed as if Kairn's brain were in a fog as thick as the Necropolis night.

Still, all of those things paled in comparison to the miraculous fact that the dead young man was walking the streets of Necropolis!

When they reached the gates of the cemetery, Zak stopped. "I'm not sure I can go in there."

"I must go," Kairn said. "Inside here is the reason I came back."

"It's true then, isn't it?" Zak guessed. "There's something about the Crypt of the Ancients that brings back the dead."

"Yes."

Zak swallowed hard. "Kairn, this power, can it... Can it return anyone? From anywhere?"

Kairn smiled. "Come with me and see for yourself."

It sounded like another dare. Zak wouldn't have accepted it from anyone else, but Kairn was proof that some mystical power surrounded the crypt. He thought of his parents and decided it was a risk worth taking.

Kairn led him back through the graveyard until they reached the massive Crypt of the Ancients. It looked the same as it had the other night.

Zak was impressed when Kairn grabbed the handles of the heavy doors in his thin, bony hands. The doors must have weighed several hundred kilos, but Kairn pulled them open easily. Beyond, a stairway led down into the dark.

"This is the way to the secret," Kairn said. "If you follow, you will see how the dead can come back to life."

"Um... okay," Zak said, suddenly feeling chilled.

He stepped inside behind Kairn, who paused only to slam the doors closed. Instantly they were plunged into utter darkness.

Zak could not see Kairn, even though he was standing right next to him.

"Wait, it's too dark to go down there," Zak stated nervously.

"Oh, you need light. I forgot," Kairn replied. "Do you still have the glowrod I gave you?"

Zak fumbled in his pocket until he found the small rod and ignited it. It cast a faint light on the stone walls of the crypt.

Zak's pulse raced as they made their way down the steep, slippery stairs that curved into the ground. The stairs were so small that Zak kept one hand touching the stone wall beside him to keep his balance. Kairn didn't even have any problems getting down the stairs, though he was twitching violently.

Zak had seen that twitch in the graveyard zombies. He also had the feeling that he'd seen it somewhere else. Where had it been?

They reached the bottom of the spiral stairway and entered a small tomb. A great stone coffin lay in the center of the room. There were cobwebs all across its top, and a thick layer of dust lay on the floor around it. But next to the great coffin a pathway had been cleared of dust. This pathway led to another door at the far end of the tomb. Someone had used it often.

Kairn, still twitching, walked over and grabbed that door by a large metal handle. As he pulled the door open, Zak said, "It's the legend of the witch's curse, isn't it? All the stories about people coming here to call their loved ones back to life-they're true. It can be done."

"Of course it can be done," replied the voice of Dr. Evazan.

Chapter Thirteen

Zak didn't think about it. He turned to run. But before he could take a step, Kairn grabbed his arm. Kairn's skin was ice-cold, and his grip was unbreakable.

"No, no, no," Dr. Evazan said in a sickly sweet voice. "You can't leave just as the fun is about to begin. Bring him here!"

Obediently Kairn dragged Zak further into the room. Zak struggled every step of the way, but Kairn had supernatural strength.

Evazan waited patiently until Zak stood before him. Kairn stood behind Zak, holding him by both shoulders. Zak continued to struggle, but he might as well have been fighting a stone.

"Welcome to my medical facility," Dr. Evazan began.

The crypt looked more like a chamber of horrors. The walls were lined with specimen jars full of squishy objects Zak didn't want to think about. Nearby stood a table covered with dull, rusty medical tools. There were several small doors along the back wall. Each door had a small barred window set in it, and through the window Zak could see pale zombies in the cells. He looked at Evazan again and shuddered. "You're supposed to be dead."

Evazan chuckled. "True. But I'm the doctor, so I get to announce the time of death. And my time hasn't come yet. Or I should say, it's come and gone, and I'm still here."

Evazan twitched and Zak remembered-he had seen Evazan twitch onboard the starship!

"What do you mean?" Zak asked.

Evazan pretended to be surprised. "You mean you haven't figured it out yet? Doesn't your friend Kairn here give you any hints at all?" Evazan threw his arm back in a sweeping gesture that covered the entire room. "I've had a breakthrough in my experiments. I have figured out a way to reanimate dead tissue."

"What does that mean?" Zak asked.

"It means," Evazan said triumphantly, "I have learned to bring back the dead. Like I did with your friend Kairn here. And myself, of course."

Zak felt fear and relief churn in his stomach. Dr. Evazan was a mad scientist, but at least now Zak knew he wasn't insane. "How could you bring yourself back if you were dead in the first place?"

Evazan laughed, and the unscarred side of his face wrinkled into a horrific grin. "In my line of work, it's good to think ahead. I heard that Boba Fett was in the area, and I knew he'd find me eventually. I injected myself with the reanimation serum. Once I died, there was only one step left in the process before I came back."

"And those zombies in the cages back there. They're like the ones I saw earlier. They're more of your experiments?"

"My, my, you ask a lot of questions. But I suppose it's good for me to practice my bedside manner. People say it's my weak point." Evazan began to fill a syringe with a pale red liquid. "Your timing at the cemetery was extraordinary. You got to see some of my undead creatures come alive, so to speak. Of course, those are the cruder models. They look more dead than alive. "

"But you and Kairn look..."

"Alive?" Evazan gloated. "That is due to my genius.

I've made improvements since my first experiments. My new zombies look a bit healthier, and they can talk. My tests indicate they even keep their old memories. Kairn is a good example of the next stage and well, frankly, so am I."

Dr. Death actually looked sad for a moment. "The unfortunate thing is that I couldn't use the improved serum on the rest of the corpses in the graveyard. I'm afraid I need fresh bodies for it to work properly. Old bodies come out clumsy and awkward. For the results to be perfect, I have to be the one to kill my patients. That's why I force-fed your friend here the crypt- berries. They killed him without doing too much damage."

Zak was horrified. "You mean you killed him just so you could bring him back to life?"

"Of course." Evazan held up the syringe and looked at Kairn. "Kairn, put your friend on the table."

"Kairn, don't do it! Help me!" Zak said.

For the slightest moment, Kairn paused.

"Oh, I'd save what little breath I had left, if I were you," Evazan warned. "These zombies listen only to my commands. Put him on the table."

This time Kairn obeyed immediately. He lifted Zak easily and dropped him on the examining table. The undead Necropolitan pinned him down with a viselike grip. "But why are you doing this-why are you creating zombies?" Zak managed to ask.

Evazan held up the syringe and squeezed it until one drop of the pale red liquid bubbled out and ran down along the edge of the needle. "Haven't you noticed how strong they are? Also, they don't feel any pain at all, and they are easily conditioned to take orders. In other words, they'll make perfect soldiers. And since people are always dying, there will be a limitless supply. " Evazan seemed horribly pleased with himself. "Whoever uses my process will have an inexhaustible, invincible army. And I, of course, will become very rich."

"You're insane! Who would buy this serum?"

"Oh, I already have a buyer. A very, very powerful buyer. He's close to the Emperor himself, I believe." Evazan twitched violently. He saw Zak staring at him and shrugged through another twitch. "The twitching is a defect in the serum. But I think I've fixed it. I'll know as soon as my next subject reanimates."

"Your next subject?"

Evazan looked surprised. "Why, yes. You, of course."

He brought the needle close to Zak.

"No!" Zak struggled against Kairn's impossible grip. "Kairn! We were friends!"

Kairn spoke slowly. "I'm sorry, Zak." He twitched, and Zak thought he felt Kairn's grip loosen.

"Silence!" Evazan snarled. "I didn't give you permission to speak. Now hold him still!"

Instantly Kairn's grip grew tight again. Evazan mumbled, "Interesting. This new version of zombie is less obedient than the earlier ones. I'll have to take care of that."

Evazan poked the needle into Zak's arm.

Zak kicked and thrashed, trying to free himself, but Kairn was far too strong.

"Seeing as how you should be my greatest success, it's only fair to tell you about the process itself. It's quite brilliant. The serum contains most of the active ingredients. The only thing missing is the final chemical-oddly enough, it's a chemical found in the slime trails of the boneworms that live on Necropolis."

"So that's why you're working here."

"Exactly. All I have to do is dig up the body, or get to it before it's buried, and inject the serum. Once the body is back in the ground, I simply let the bone-worms do their work."

"But the boneworms eat the bodies," Zak said with a shudder.

"No, no, no," Dr. Evazan corrected. "The bone-worms dig their way into the skin and suck the marrow from your bones. Once they've had their fill, my serum kicks in, filling the bones with reanimation fluid. It's absolutely brilliant." Evazan checked

his chronometer. "And it's just a matter of time before my latest batch of undead scratch and claw their way to the surface."

Zak's arm throbbed where Evazan had given him the shot. He was surprised when Dr. Death picked up another needle, this one full of clear liquid.

"Another shot?" Zak moaned. He was already feeling ill.

"Oh, that first shot wasn't the serum. That was a diluted version of cryptberry juice. Instead of killing you like normal cryptberry juice does, that shot will put you into a coma. Of course, everyone will think you're dead. This is the reanimation serum."

Evazan jabbed the second needle into Zak's arm.

The doctor nodded matter-of-factly. "You see, I think the twitching is a side effect of the original death, like the blaster shot that killed me or the poison that killed Kairn here. So instead of killing you in a conventional way, I'm giving you the serum first. Then I'm going to, shall we say, extinguish your flame in the way that will do the least damage."

Zak felt himself growing drowsy. "Wh-what are you going to do."

"Oh, I'm not going to do anything," Evazan said with the cruelest of smiles. "I'm going to let your friends do it for me."

***

Zak woke from the first restful sleep he'd had in several nights. He had not had a single nightmare, not even a dream. His first waking thought was that he felt refreshed.

He tried to open his eyes but couldn't. He tried to sit up, but he couldn't. When he tried to move his arms, his hands, even his fingers, nothing happened. He was completely paralyzed.

He still had his sense of touch. He could tell that he was lying down on something soft and warm. Was he in his own bed?

He heard someone crying nearby. It was Tash. Then he heard Deevee's voice.

"That's right, Tash," the droid was saying awkwardly. "Let it out. It's no shame to cry when a loved one passes on."

Loved one? Who had died? Zak wondered if something terrible had happened to Uncle Hoole. But then he heard Uncle Hoole's voice. "They're ready to begin now, Tash."

What's going on? Why can't I move?

He heard Tash sob. "Oh, Zak, what happened to you? You knew those cryptberries were dangerous. How could this have happened?"

What? Zak wanted to yell. But he couldn't speak.

Uncle Hoole spoke again. "Step back now, Tash. At least the Necropolitans have allowed us to say goodbye to Zak. It goes against their customs to let mourners be so close to the grave. Come now. They're ready for the burial."

Burial?

Zak heard a heavy lid close right over his head, and he sensed that he was now in a small, confined space. A cold feeling settled in his stomach as he realized that it was a coffin.

He was inside a coffin.

They were going to bury him alive.

Chapter Fourteen

From inside the coffin, Zak tried to shout "I'm alive! I'm alive!" But his mouth wouldn't move. He was still under the influence of the paralyzing cryptberry juice.

He heard someone begin to speak outside. It was Pylum, the Master of Cerements. Pylum began to repeat the same funeral rites he had said over Kairn's grave.

I don't need a funeral! I'm not dead! I'm not dead! Zak cried. No one heard him. His screams were all in his head.

Pylum finished the funeral rites and added a speech, which he directed to those who had gathered. "It is a tragedy when any young person passes on. It is especially sad that an offworlder has gone into the void. But let the living learn a lesson from the passing of Zak Arranda. He was a good young man, but he disturbed the graves of the dead, and for that he paid the ultimate price."

There is no curse! It was Evazan! He's come back! He did this to me!

Pylum continued. "We dedicate this ground to the memory of the dearly departed Zak Arranda. Let all honor be bestowed upon the dead. Let the dead rest with the dead as long as the galaxy spins. Let this ground remain sealed over the departed forever and ever."

No!

Zak heard a heavy bolt slam into place, just like the one he'd seen on Kairn's coffin. He was locked inside. Forever.

Zak felt himself being lowered into a hole. He heard Tash sob one more time. Then there was a loud thump on top of the coffin.

They were shoveling dirt over him.

Zak had a terrible thought. Maybe he was dead. Maybe Evazan had given him too much cryptberry juice and had killed him. Could this be what death was like, to be frozen forever in one place?

As more clumps of dirt dropped onto the coffin, Zak imagined the hours turning into days, the days turning into weeks, the weeks into years. After hundreds of years, would he still be here, stuck in this same dark hole for all time?

The sound of shoveling had grown quieter. Dark thoughts crept into Zak's brain. There was no use in struggling. Just accept your fate. Your life is over.

Zak imagined his parents. He had wanted to see them again, to say goodbye to them. Now he knew that was useless. What little was left of them floated among the space debris that had once been Alderaan. Frozen, unreachable, untouchable.

Memories filled Zak's mind: picnics with his parents and Tash, riding a hoverboat on the lake, playing two-person touchball. He remembered the day his father had taught him to ride a skimboard.

Eager to remember everything about his parents, Zak tried to recall every moment he could, right up to the last one. Six months ago he and Tash had packed their things to go on a two-week field trip. It was their first time away from home, and they were both a little nervous. Zak remembered telling his parents how scared he was.

"I've never been so far away from you before," he had said.

His mother had hugged him. "Don't worry, Zak. You could be on the other side of the galaxy, but you're always right here in

my heart, so you're never really far away. And as long as you keep me there, I'll be near to you, too."

Zak had forgotten those words until that moment. His mother had told him to keep her in his heart. He hadn't done that. He'd been too busy feeling depressed to think of all the good times he'd had with them, to keep his memories of them alive.

That's where I should have looked for them, Zak decided. Instead of searching in old superstitions, I should have looked inside me. That's where mom and dad are. That's where they'll always be!

But he had realized it too late. Zak blinked as he felt a tear sting his eye.

I blinked!

Zak felt his mouth move. He opened it and closed it experimentally. Then he tried to move his hand. His fingers moved. He wiggled his toes. He couldn't move his arms or legs yet, but the cryptberry drug was wearing off.

If the drug is wearing off that means I'm alive. I really am alive!

Hope surged in Zak. If he was alive, there had to be something he could do. He filled his lungs with air and shouted "I'm alive! Somebody help me! I'm alive!"

He wondered if the sound would reach up through the ground. He hoped it would. Now that he knew he was alive, he was desperate to get out of the coffin. He would soon run out of air.

"Help! Someone get me out of here!"

Seconds later Zak heard a small scraping noise against the lid of his coffin. At first he thought someone had heard him already, but then he heard a similar noise beneath him.

Then he heard the sound on both sides of his coffin. Zak realized what it was.

The boneworms were gnawing their way in.

Chapter Fifteen

Tash, Deevee, and Uncle Hoole walked slowly back to the hostel as another dark Necropolitan day faded to an even darker night.

Tash was devastated. Zak's death had been a terrible shock to them all.

After her encounter with Boba Fett, Tash had turned back to look for Zak. She soon realized that it was impossible to find anyone among the winding streets of the dark city. She assumed that he'd just gotten bored, or lost, and would make his way back to the hostel as soon as he could.

At the hostel she had waited for an hour, and Zak still hadn't returned. She began to get a heavy, sinking feeling, as though a black hole had opened in her stomach. It was a feeling she'd had before-the feeling that something was terribly wrong. Despite her feeling, she was at first afraid to tell Uncle Hoole, because she didn't want to reveal the reason she and Zak had gone out. After all, they were spying on Boba Fett and trying to get information about Hoole himself.

But when another hour passed and the feeling of dread grew stronger, Tash knew she couldn't wait. She went to Uncle Hoole and told him that Zak was missing.

Hoole reacted in his usual stern Shi'ido way. "What was he doing out? That young man is constantly getting into trouble."

"Um, this time it was my fault, Uncle Hoole," Tash confessed. "I wanted to... um... see a few things, and I convinced him to go along. We got separated."

Uncle Hoole frowned. "Then we have you to thank for this disturbance. Come on, we had better summon the authorities."

Uncle Hoole convinced the owner of the hostel to help them, and soon they had called the local law enforcement. Zak's description was sent to all the local patrols, but because he had only been gone a few hours, the authorities wouldn't launch a full-fledged search.

Uncle Hoole decided that they should search the streets themselves. "Tash, you will come with me. Deevee, you will search on your own. Can you manage?"

Deevee was a droid, but he had practiced long and hard to develop a very humanlike imitation of disgust. He sarcastically replied, "I have calculated the number of colored grains in a Tatooine sand painting. I think I can manage to walk and look for Zak at the same time."

Deevee quickly began searching for Zak. No matter what the droid said, he was fond of his two troublesome charges.

While Hoole and Tash had searched the streets, Deevee headed directly for one specific location. His computer brain had already formulated a theory, but the conclusion sent a tremor through his servos. Deevee ran his theory through his logic circuits for any sign of malfunction, but found none.

Deevee's analytical program was extremely sophisticated, and he was almost never wrong.

Which is why it was Deevee who had found Zak lying in the cemetery, with a few cryptberries still clutched in his hand.

Deevee had summoned help, and Zak had been rushed to a medical facility immediately, but it was too late. The cryptberries had done their work.

"It just doesn't make sense," Tash had said tearfully as she, her uncle, and the droid reached the hostel. "Why would Zak do something like that? He knew those berries were poisonous."

Uncle Hoole put a hand on her shoulder, "Zak has been rather... distracted... lately. I can't say I know what he was thinking. We may never know."

Tash couldn't accept that. "That's not good enough for me, Uncle Hoole, and it shouldn't be good enough for you. Zak would never have eaten those berries on his own. Someone must have forced him, or tricked him. You can't really believe that Zak was the victim of some ancient curse of the dead!"

Uncle Hoole looked skeptical. "Who would have a reason to harm Zak?"

Tash shrugged. "Maybe Zak wasn't seeing things after all. Maybe this Dr. Evazan is still alive."

Uncle Hoole considered the possibility. "It is extremely unlikely, Tash."

But Tash's words sounded right to her, and she was learning to trust her intuition.

"You're a scientist," she challenged. "You shouldn't make up your mind until you have proof. And there's only one way to find out."

Hoole looked intrigued. "What do you propose?"

Tash decided to lay her cards on the table. "I want to dig up Dr. Evazan's grave. That's what Zak wanted to do, but I talked him out of it."

She was afraid that Hoole would refuse immediately. To her surprise, the Shi'ido contemplated her request for a long moment. Then he turned to Deevee. "Deevee, you have files on Necropolis. Is there any custom or law that permits the dead to be exhumed?"

Deevee scanned his internal files. "I'm afraid not, Master Hoole. On Necropolis, once the body is buried, that's where it stays. At least, that's where one hopes it stays."

Tash's heart sank. "Does that mean we can't have Evazan's grave dug up?"

"No," Uncle Hoole said firmly, "it means we will have to do it ourselves. "

Tash jumped to her feet. "Uncle Hoole, really?"

"That is an excellent decision, Master Hoole!" Deevee said excitedly. Then he calmed his voice down. "Of course, it's my duty to warn you that grave-robbing is a serious offense on Necropolis. We must be careful."

The Shi'ido nodded. "I agree. That's why we must be ready to leave immediately. I want you to go back to the dockyard and see to the final arrangements about purchasing our new ship. Tash and I will meet you there."

***

A few kilometers away and two meters beneath the ground, Zak heard the scraping outside his coffin grow louder. He could move one of his arms now, and he fumbled awkwardly in his pocket. He hoped they hadn't removed his possessions before burying him...

There! He still had the small glowrod that Kairn had given him that first night. He activated it now, shedding a gloomy light on his tiny prison.

He wondered how much oxygen he had left. The light of the glowrod revealed small holes in the coffin. Who would put holes in a coffin?

Evazan!

As Zak watched, slimy, white creatures began to force their long fat bodies through the openings. The boneworms were coming in.

Chapter Sixteen

Deevee arrived at the dockyard as nervous as a newly programmed protocol droid. Although he was pleased about Hoole's decision, he wondered why his master was taking such a great risk. It wasn't like Hoole to act irrationally. But sometimes the Shi'ido did things that even Deevee didn't understand.

The smiling salesman, Meego, greeted Deevee warmly. "Good evening. We were just about to close up for the night. How may I be of service?"

"I am here to see that the ship we purchased is ready to be picked up."

Meego's smile widened. "Ah, yes, your ship, your ship. Well, we've had a slight problem with your ship. Nothing serious, mind you, just a small curve in the hyperspace lane, so to speak."

Deevee was not programmed for metaphors. "A curve in a hyperspace lane would cause immense damage to anyone traveling there and probably result in a loss of life. Is that what you are implying, sir?"

The salesman winked as though he were telling a joke. "Look, it's not that bad. The truth is we, um, accidentally sold your ship to someone else. Can you believe it? Of all the foolish things! I can't tell you how sorry I am."

"What can you tell me?" the droid said. "Specifically, what can you tell me about the credits my master transferred to you."

Meego looked hurt. "Oh, not to worry, not to worry. Your master's credits are safe with Meego. We'll just consider them a down payment on any other ship you choose."

The droid's logic circuits sent out an internal alarm.

"Down payment? You mean you expect us to give you more money because you made a mistake?"

Meego's expressive face sudden became very sympathetic. "Now, now, we are sorry about the error. But, you see, you bought the least expensive ship in the dockyard. So if you want to buy another one, you'll have to spend just a little bit more."

The salesman shrugged and smiled.

Deevee knew when he was being tricked. His analytical circuits burned hot as he searched for a solution. He looked around at the rows of ships until his photoreceptors settled on the well-worn hull of the ship Zak had told them about. It looked more like scrap metal than a starship, but Deevee trusted Zak's opinion. "What about that ship?"

The salesman frowned. "That ship? Oh, urn, well, as I said the other day, that ship hasn't yet been overhauled. It's not for sale yet."

"But my master requires a ship immediately, and that is the only one we can buy with the money we've already paid."

The salesman shrugged. "Then I guess you'll have to make a down payment on a more expensive one."

Deevee accessed a particular memory file. "Sir, I was just thinking about the Tal Nami system."

"Really? What about it?" the salesman asked.

"The Tal Nami have a very interesting culture. Their bodies need two foods to survive-the fruit of the egoa tree and the root of the capabara plant. But the two plants can't grow in the same regions. So the Tal Nami of one region have to trade with the Tal Nami of another region for everyone to survive. In order to prevent the entire population from starving, they have developed

a code of honor among traders. Each trader tries to make sure the other one gets the better end of the bargain. Since both sides are doing this, it assures a fair trade."

"Fascinating," the dealer yawned.

"Of course, any trader who is caught dealing unfairly is immediately punished. His feet are tied to the roots of an egoa tree, and his hands are tied to the branches of that same tree. The egoa tree grows at a rate of one meter per day. The result is gruesome, but the Tal Nami have an intense dislike of villainous traders. They will travel light-years to track one down. " Deevee paused for effect. "Have you ever been to Tal Nami, sir?"

"Can't say that I have."

"Master Hoole has. Several times, to visit friends. Good friends. In fact I believe he plans to go there soon. I can only imagine what the Tal Nami would say if Master Hoole arrived in a ship foisted on him by an unscrupulous dealer."

Meego swallowed. "Did you say they'd travel light-years to track down..."

"Yes, sir," Deevee replied. "Light-years."

Meego stared at Deevee, but it was impossible to tell if the droid were bluffing or not. Finally he shook his head. "Suit yourself, droid. I'd probably never get rid of this heap anyway. People would be afraid to buy it.

"Why is that?" Deevee asked.

"Too much bad history," said the salesman. "Didn't I mention it before? This ship is called the Shroud. It used to belong to that criminal, Dr. Evazan."

***

Deevee opened the hatchway and let himself onboard. He was surprised at the sophisticated equipment inside. Evazan might have been an evil doctor, but he was obviously quite intelligent.

"Now you know I'm not supposed to do this," Meego said. "It's against regulations to sell used ships until the memory banks

have been wiped. You never know what kind of personal information might get passed along."

"That's correct," Deevee said. "You never do know."

Deevee's sophisticated brain buzzed with theories. If this was Evazan's ship, maybe Zak had seen him onboard. Hadn't Zak said that Evazan was carrying something away with him? Perhaps Evazan had come back to get some important information. Deevee wondered if he'd gotten it all.

He punched up the computer. "Hey, you're not supposed to do that!" Meego protested.

Deevee looked at the salesman. "Do you recall the extra credits you tried to squeeze from me a few moments ago? Hand this ship over to me with the memory banks intact, and those credits are yours."

Meego had never been one to care much for regulations, especially when there was profit to be made. "It's a deal."

A few minutes later, Deevee was alone, browsing through a library full of computer files. Some had been deleted, but many more were intact. Deevee's photoreceptors skimmed across one startling title: "RE-ANIMATION OF DEAD TISSUE."

Urgent alarms rattled Deevee's program as he scanned the report. He was at first amazed at what he read-and then horrified as he saw the phrase "the use of cryptberries may enhance the reanimation process. They induce a state that imitates death, which will allow for further preparation of the body..."

A state that imitates death...

Deevee made the connection. "Zak!"

Deevee turned to go, but found his way was blocked.

Boba Fett had crept up behind him.

***

At the graveyard Tash and Uncle Hoole found the iron gates sealed shut. They could see the control panel on the inside wall through the bars, but it was much too far away for them to reach.

"Wait a moment," Uncle Hoole said.

He closed his eyes. His skin started to wriggle and squirm across his body like it was alive. Then Hoole's whole body began to twist and transform. In moments the Shi'ido had disappeared, and a Ranat——a small ratlike creature stood in its place. "I'll be right back," the Ranat said.

Hoole had shape-shifted as easily as most people walk or talk.

Hoole slipped easily through the bars and scampered over to the control panel inside the cemetery wall. The control panel was set too high for a Ranat to reach, so the Shi'ido shape-shifted again, and Hoole reappeared. He punched a few buttons, and the gates swung open.

Tash shook her head. "I'll never get used to that."

"It is an ability that is often useful," Hoole admitted. "Now we must hurry."

Dr. Evazan's grave was on the far side of the cemetery, in a plot reserved for criminals and Imperial bureaucrats. Tash and Uncle Hoole had brought two small shovels with them.

"You know, we are disturbing the dead." Tash smiled nervously. "They could get angry."

Hoole scowled. "Ridiculous. That is superstitious nonsense, Tash."

Tash didn't answer.

Hoole plunged his shovel into the ground. He scooped up a few shovelfuls of dirt, then noticed that Tash wasn't helping. He looked at his niece curiously. She had grown very pale. "Is something wrong, Tash?"

Tash tried to speak, but she couldn't. Her mouth was dry and her tongue had frozen. She pointed over Hoole's shoulder.

A zombie was staggering toward them.

Chapter Seventeen

The undead creature had pale skin, stringy hair, and a sunken, skeletal face. It was exactly like the creatures Zak had described.

Uncle Hoole turned just as the zombie came within reach. Instinctively the Shi'ido threw up the shovel he was holding to ward off the ghoulish- looking creature. The shovel slammed against the zombie's head, but it didn't seem to notice. It grabbed Hoole with both arms and squeezed so hard that the scientist gasped.

"Uncle Hoole!" Tash cried, taking a step forward.

"Stay... back!" Hoole grunted. "It's too strong." Hoole felt the air being forced from his lungs. He took as deep a breath as he could, and closed his eyes. His entire body started to wriggle, and the zombie squeezed tighter. But Hoole was no longer there. The zombie found itself holding a slippery water eel that thrashed wildly until it shot from the undead monster's arms. It landed on the ground with a slap and shape-shifted back into Hoole. The zombie roared and lumbered forward once more.

"Tash, run!" Uncle Hoole ordered.

Tash didn't argue. She turned and started to run, but in front of her a grave suddenly broke open like a cracking egg. A clawing white hand reached out of the ground and ice-cold fingers wrapped themselves around her ankle. Tash stomped on the arm

with her free foot, but the zombie was unaffected by pain. With its free hand, it continued to dig its way up from beneath the ground. Tash could see its dead face, still half-buried, leering up at her from the hole in the ground.

Uncle Hoole dropped to his knees beside her, using both hands to pry the zombie's fingers away from Tash. But the creature was incredibly strong, and even together they could not break its grip.

"What are we going to do?" Tash gasped.

Hoole tried to remain calm, but even he looked worried. "Try to use our heads," he answered.

Hoole stood up and turned to the other zombie, which was staggering toward them. The Shi'ido made himself an easy target, standing just to the side of Tash in front of the second zombie's grave. Growling, the first zombie lunged forward to grab him, but once again Hoole shape-shifted-into the tiny Ranat form he'd taken before. The lunging zombie stumbled right over him and fell headlong into the second grave. The two undead creatures both howled, struggling with each other, and Tash pulled her leg free.

Hoole, now back in his own shape, helped Tash to her feet and they started toward the exit.

"By the stars!" Uncle Hoole swore.

Tash was startled. She had never seen Uncle Hoole lose his composure. But in the next moment, she saw why.

All around them the ground was churning. Massive headstones collapsed or sank into the ground as the creatures below struggled to reach the surface. Hundreds of graves were on the verge of breaking open, spilling forth their buried inhabitants.

The city of the dead was coming back to life.

Tash and Uncle Hoole had no choice but to run through the mass of writhing graves.

At first their escape seemed easy. It took the zombies several minutes to dig their way to the surface.

Groping hands and arms snatched at Tash and Hoole from the graves. Tash shuddered-it looked like a horrible garden of fingers, arms, and hands planted in the ground.

Before long they could see figures rising up in the mist before them. Farther along, the zombies had had more time to free themselves, and between them and the gates lay an army of the undead.

"Zak was right!" Tash yelled to Hoole. "The dead are coming back! How can this be?"

Hoole panted for breath as he ran. "I don't know. Yet."

They plunged into the mist.

The zombies were relentless and incredibly strong, but they were slow. Twitching and staggering, they closed in on their two targets. Uncle Hoole and Tash slipped away from them or ducked under their arms. To Tash it seemed like some twisted version of the games of touchball she and Zak had played with their parents at home.

Tash was tall for her age, but she was limber and quick and able to dodge the pursuing creatures. Twice Hoole was grabbed, and twice he shape-shifted out of the zombies' clutches. But more and more zombies came after them out of the mist, and escape looked impossible until they saw a row of iron bars before them.

"The gates!" Uncle Hoole said. "We've made it!"

Tash gasped as a zombie nearly grabbed her by the neck. She slipped away and dashed for the gate, followed closely by her uncle.

The gates were ajar, and they slipped through, slamming the doors behind them. Zombies surged toward the gates, pulling at the iron bars.

Tash and Hoole had escaped the cemetery. They didn't wait to see if the gate would hold the zombies back. They ran headlong down one of the city's cobblestoned avenues. Only when they were far from the graveyard did they pause to catch their breath.

Tash's heart still had not stopped pounding when the noise of a crowd reached her ears. People, many people, were surging toward them from a nearby street. Angry words were shouted in their direction.

"What's going on?" she asked.

Hoole frowned. "That is a mob. And Pylum is leading it."

The Master of Cerements led the mob right to Hoole and Tash. As they approached, Hoole shouted, "This place isn't safe! Something terrible is happening at the cemetery. Corpses are coming back to life."

Pylum scowled and jabbed a bony finger their way. "We know. And it's all your fault!"

Chapter Eighteen

Pylum's eyes glinted angrily. "The dead are rising all over the city! Corpses walk the streets. People are fleeing in terror. And you caused it!" The angry mob shouted its agreement with Pylum.

"We didn't do anything!" Tash protested.

The Master of Cerements pointed to the cemetery. "Your brother offended the dead by entering the cemetery, and now you two have followed him. You have brought the Curse of Sycorax down on our heads."

Hoole shook his head. "There has to be a more reasonable explanation for this than some ancient curse. I'm sure we can find a solution for this problem if we work together."

"See, see!" Pylum screeched, turning to the mob of Necropolitans. "They ignore our ancient laws! They trample our sacred ground. I warned you that this might happen, and now it has!"

"What can we do?" one of the Necropolitans pleaded. "Pylum, please help us."

Pylum raised himself up to his full height and proclaimed, "I am the Master of Cerements. I have read the ancient laws. The dead will not be appeased until the offenders have been punished. They must be taken to the Crypt of the Ancients!"

"Wait!" Hoole yelled in a commanding voice. "You can't possibly believe that we are responsible for this. We must work together!"

But his words were drowned out by the cries of the mob. The Necropolitans swarmed around them, surrounding Tash and grabbing Hoole. For a moment Tash thought the Shi'ido would shape-shift into a Wookiee or some other ferocious being and fight his way to safety, but he did nothing. She added that to the growing list of mysteries that surrounded Hoole.

Pylum led the mob and the two prisoners back to the cemetery. They found that the twisted gates had been wrenched from their settings and tossed to the ground. The zombies were nowhere in sight, but Tash didn't want to take chances. "You don't want to go in there," she said to Pylum, "trust me."

The Master of Cerements scowled. "You fool. The dead have already risen. They are terrorizing the city. The graveyard is empty."

It was true. The cemetery had become a wide field of empty holes and mounds of earth. The long rows of headstones had toppled. In most places the soil had been trampled and churned to mud by the passage of the undead. It was eerily quiet.

The angry Necropolitans paused at the bizarre sight of so many upturned graves. Some of them cried out and wept.

"See what the offworlders have caused," the Master of

Cerements screeched. "Bring them to the crypt!"

Urged on by Pylum, the Necropolitans dragged Hoole and Tash across the field of empty graves, toward the center of the cemetery. There, the massive Crypt of the Ancients still stood as solemn and ominous as ever.

"Open the doors!" Pylum ordered.

Some of the Necropolitans gasped. "But we've never opened up the crypt before!"

The Master of Cerements held up his hand to silence them. "These are cursed times. The ancient laws demand that we throw the violators into the crypt. Open the doors!"

Tash was amazed at how willingly the mob followed Pylum's orders. Only a few days ago, some of them had thought he was an old fool fretting about outdated superstitions. Now they were frightened enough to make him their leader.

It took two or three strong men pulling at each handle, and even then the great doors moved reluctantly. When the doors were opened wide enough, Pylum ordered them to stop. "Put the offworlders inside."

Tash and Hoole were shoved through the opening so roughly that Tash would have tumbled down the steep stairway if Hoole hadn't caught her arm. They turned back toward the opening, where they could see Pylum addressing the mob. "Go back to your homes! I will go into the crypt and plead with Sycorax to call off this evil curse. When I enter, shut the doors behind me and go back to your homes until all is calm again!"

With that, Pylum entered the crypt. The Necropolitans shut the doors behind him, plunging all three of them into complete darkness.

A second later there was small click and a glowrod lit up the stairwell, casting eerie light over Pylum's face. He looked at Tash and Hoole, and chuckled.

"Those superstitious fools," he laughed.

"What?" Tash replied in amazement.

Pylum laughed again. "Imagine believing all that nonsense about curses and legends."

"Y-You mean you don't?" she stuttered.

"Of course not." Pylum pushed past them and started down the stairs. "Follow me."

Tash and Hoole had no choice but to follow Pylum down the steep stairway into the tomb below. At the bottom of the stairs, Tash could see two stone coffins and a large, closed door. Pylum walked up to the coffins.

"Sycorax," he chuckled. "What a foolish story. But at least all my years of study finally proved useful."

"I don't know what you're thinking, Pylum," Uncle Hoole said, "but I warn you that you alone are no match for me."

Pylum grinned. "Oh, I know all about your Shi'ido powers. You could turn into a wampa ice beast and tear me apart right here. In fact that's why I arranged to have you brought down here. My associates and I consider your shape-changing powers a perfect test."

Tash's brain was spinning in confusion. "Test of what?"

Pylum smiled. "Why, a test of our undead soldiers, naturally."

He pounded on the door. It slowly creaked open. Inside an army of zombies was waiting.

Chapter Nineteen

Tash screamed.

Hoole didn't hesitate. In the blink of an eye, he did exactly as Pylum predicted. He quickly shape-shifted into an enormous wampa ice beast, using the creature's great claws to swipe at the zombies. His blows tossed them aside like feathers. But after every blow, the zombies simply stood up and started forward again, clutching at his arms and legs.

Tash knew she could do nothing to stop the zombies. But she thought she could slow them down. She found an old length of chain lying on the tomb floor and used it to trip the awkward zombies. It didn't slow them for long, but at least it kept some of them from swarming over Hoole.

The Shi'ido shifted from a wampa to a gundark and from a gundark to a reptilian creature that Tash had never seen before, but nothing stopped the undead. They felt no pain and no fear, and they were determined to bring Hoole down.

Hoole and Tash soon found themselves backed up against the wall. Zombies crowded into the small space around them, pressing forward. Hoole had transformed into a Wookiee, and shoved the zombies back with a roar, but it was like pushing against a brick wall. Powerful hands clutched at his Wookiee fur, dragging him down and smothering him.

In a blur, Hoole transformed into a dozen different species from across the galaxy. But none of them were strong enough, fast enough, or slippery enough to escape the undead mob. Hoole returned to his Wookiee form for one last surge of strength, then fell to his knees with a defiant roar. A dozen zombies hung onto him, ensuring that he could not get up again. Hoole had lost the battle.

Pylum drew a small blaster from his pouch and held it to Tash's head. "Now, Dr. Hoole, I suggest you return to your normal shape and stay that way before I do the girl serious harm."

The Wookiee snarled but obeyed. Hoole reappeared under the pile of walking corpses. He looked tired but unhurt.

Beyond the door, Tash heard the sound of someone clapping. "Excellent, excellent," said a malicious voice. "You see, Pylum, I told you the zombies were invincible. They fear nothing and they feel nothing. They are the perfect soldiers, and this test proves it."

The speaker stepped through the doorway. Tash gasped, and even Hoole grunted in surprise. It was Dr. Evazan.

"You're working together!" she cried.

"Naturally," Evazan said. "I use my great scientific genius to animate the corpses while Pylum uses the superstitions of this backward planet to keep the locals away from the cemetery."

"It was the perfect cover," Hoole said. "You used the great supply of bodies here for your experiments. And if anyone did see anything unusual, Pylum simply blamed it on the curse of Necropolis."

"But why?" Tash asked Pylum. "You betrayed all your beliefs."

Pylum rolled his eyes. "You are naive, aren't you? Do you know what it's like to be taunted and mocked by teenagers like Kairn? To be called a madman for upholding the ancient ways? I believed those legends!" Pylum's eyes blazed. "When the jokes became too much to bear, I did the unthinkable. I broke into the

Crypt of the Ancients to see the grave of Sycorax itself, to prove that the legends were true! But do you know what I found?" Pylum had worked himself into a rage. He strode over to the stone coffins and heaved one of them open. "This!"

Inside the stone box lay a frail skeleton, wrapped in a tattered gray shroud. The skeleton was so thin, so delicate, that it looked a breath might snap its bones. Pylum almost snarled. "This pile of bones is the mighty Sycorax, the bringer of the curse that has cast a shadow over Necropolis for a thousand years!"

"Puh! " Pylum spat and dropped the stone lid, which crashed back into place with a thunderous boom, sending up a cloud of dust. When the dust cleared, Tash saw that the stone lid had cracked.

Pylum sneered. "Everything I believed in was a lie. There was no curse. I had become the servant of a superstition. When Evazan offered me the chance to make a fortune by helping him, I took it."

"Precisely," Dr. Evazan said. "Everything went according to plan until that bounty hunter showed up, followed by that annoying brat."

"Zak," Tash whispered. "You killed him."

Evazan laughed the most evil laugh she'd ever heard. "Why, no, my dear. You killed him. I merely put him in a brief, deathlike coma. You buried him." Evazan checked his wrist chronometer. "In fact if my guess is correct, right now your brother is either running out of air or running out of room to hide from the boneworms."

***

Both were true. In his coffin Zak felt the air become thick and stifling. But that was the least of his concerns.

Above his head he saw the wood of his coffin bulge inward and crack. A fat white wriggling thing appeared, squirming as it

tried to enlarge the hole it had made. Using his glowrod Zak poked the worm and it recoiled.

It was a futile gesture. Boneworms were burrowing a dozen holes in his coffin. Confined as he was, Zak couldn't reach them all.

He saw one of the pale, white worms drop into the coffin with him.

Another, then another, followed. Zak felt a sickly wet slap on his cheek, and he felt something crawl right across his mouth. Something else tickled his ear.

"Yaggh!" Zak thought he would be sick. He pulled the boneworms away from his head and flicked them down toward his feet, where the worms splattered against the coffin wall. The boneworms left a trail of slime where they had crawled on his skin. Zak wiped it quickly away, remembering what Evazan had said about the final ingredient to his reanimation serum.

More and more boneworms plopped through the openings in the coffin. He couldn't stop them all. Even if he could, his lungs were burning. He was nearly out of oxygen. He tried to get one more lungful of air as more boneworms wriggled wetly across his skin.

Boom!

Something heavy slammed against the top of his coffin.

Boom!

Again the coffin shivered as though struck by a battering ram.

Boom!

On the third blow, the coffin lid shattered. Someone wrenched away the slivers of wood. Then a gloved hand reached into the coffin, grabbed Zak by the shirt, and hauled him out.

It was Boba Fett.

Zak's head was spinning from lack of oxygen. He saw Boba Fett standing before him, and Deevee standing beside the bounty hunter. He wondered if he was seeing things.

Boba Fett shook him until his head started to clear. Then the bounty hunter rasped, "Where is Evazan?"

Zak tried to speak. "Th-thanks. I thought I was gone for good."

"You would have been, but you have information I need," the bounty hunter stated. "Where is Evazan?"

"Do you know, Zak?" Deevee urged. "Time is short."

Zak took a long breath and felt his lungs fill up at last. That helped his head clear. "Uh, sure. The crypt. Evazan is hiding in the Crypt of the Ancients. Now what..."

Boba Fett let him go, and Zak's weakened legs gave out from under him. Deevee helped him back up. "Deevee, how did you know?"

"I found Evazan's files," the droid explained. "And I convinced Boba Fett that you had information he needed. Can you walk?"

"I think so."

"Good. We must hurry."

To Zak's surprise the droid reached down into the coffin. Zak looked down into the hole where he had been buried. The coffin was now full of boneworms wriggling and writhing over one another, searching for the body that had been there-his body. He shuddered.

Deevee pulled out a handful of wriggling bone-worms. "We may need these. Let's go."

***

Tash was too shocked to resist when Evazan's zombie servants dragged her and Uncle Hoole into the hidden chamber, shutting the doors behind them. They were shoved into one of the holding cells, now empty of the zombies that Zak had seen earlier. The door was slammed shut by one of the undead servants. Tash recognized him as Kairn. But she didn't care. She couldn't stop thinking about Zak.

They had buried Zak alive.

She could imagine nothing more horrible.

From behind the bars of the cell, Hoole studied the undead creatures. The scientist in him could not help but be impressed. "Astounding. Complete reanimation." He looked at Evazan. "And you brought yourself back, too, no doubt."

Unable to resist the urge to gloat, Evazan told Hoole the same things he had told Zak.

"The new version of my serum seems to work quite well," he added, giving only a small twitch. "My brain functions and memory are fully intact, as are those of my other test subject." He pointed at Kairn, who guarded the door to the cell. "The serum is now ready for delivery."

"Delivery?" Hoole asked. "To whom?"

Evazan laughed. "Don't insult my intelligence, Doctor Hoole! I may like to gloat over my victims, but do you think I would reveal a secret that important, even to the doomed?" He scratched the blackened scars on the right side of his face. "My employer wouldn't look kindly on that. And I don't intend to be killed a second time."

Even as Evazan spoke, the doors to his secret laboratory exploded inward. Everyone except the zombies ducked for cover as debris flew across the room. Evazan dove behind his examination table. Pylum cowered on the floor with his hands over his ears.

When the smoke cleared, Boba Fett stood framed in the doorway. "Evazan. I do not like to repeat myself " Evazan snapped, "You won't get the chance. Zombies, destroy him!"

At Evazan's command the undead creatures turned and lumbered toward Boba Fett. Fett moved with the calm efficiency of a trained professional, leveling his blaster and firing with perfect accuracy. Every shot found a mark, blowing the zombies backward a few meters and knocking them to the ground.

But the zombies slowly picked themselves up and started forward again. Fett fired again, blasting more of the zombies out of reach. Again the zombies ignored the gaping wounds in their undead bodies and charged forward.

In the confusion of smoke and noise, Zak and Deevee slipped past Boba Fett and into the chamber. Since Evazan had ordered them to attack the bounty hunter, the zombies ignored Zak and Deevee.

"What are we going to do?" Zak shouted over the noise of Boba Fett's blaster. "Boba Fett can't even stop them."

Deevee raised his vocal volume up a level and said, "I need to get to Evazan's equipment. I think I can reverse the process!" He clutched the handful of bone-worms to his chestplate.

The equipment-covered table was only seven meters away, but Boba Fett's blaster fire turned into a frantic laser storm as he fought to keep the zombies at bay. Stray shots flashed across the room to explode against the far walls, shattering many of Evazan's specimen jars and spilling their slimy contents on the floor. Zak and Deevee had to crawl on their hands and knees to avoid the blaster bolts.

They reached the table, and Deevee immediately dropped the squirming boneworms into a shallow bowl. As they wriggled about, the worms left small slime trails along the glass. Deevee scooped drops of the disgusting liquid out of that bowl and into another, explaining, "Evazan's files explained the reanimation process. I believe I can reverse it by canceling out the chemical substance in the boneworms."

From his hiding place behind the examination table, Evazan yelled to Pylum, who lay crouched nearby. "Pylum, stop them!"

"Stop them yourself!" the Master of Cerements screeched. He bolted for the door and slipped out the same way Zak and Deevee had slipped in.

"Blasted coward," Evazan cursed. He looked around for the nearest zombie. "Kairn! Stop them!" he ordered.

The undead Necropolitan gave a slight twitch and started forward.

Deevee had grabbed hold of several chemicals on Evazan's table and had already begun to mix them together. Zak stood between Kairn and the working droid.

"Kairn, stop! You still have your memory! You're not a zombie slave!"

Kairn twitched. Zak thought he saw a flicker of life in his friend's darkened eyes. "Zak..."

"I've almost got it!" Deevee exclaimed.

Kairn growled and took another step forward. "Kairn!" Zak pleaded. "If you've still got your memories then you can still think for yourself. You don't need to follow his orders!"

Kairn blinked. He seemed to be struggling with himself. He took another step forward, then rocked back on his heels. He seemed to be fighting against Evazan's command.

"I have it!" Deevee shouted. He held up a large glass vial of purple liquid. "A small portion of this on the skin will break down the chemical reaction."

"But how do we get it on the zombies?" Zak asked.

Evazan saw his hold on Kairn slipping. "Kairn, get that vial! Bring it to me!"

Kairn lunged forward. He shoved Zak out of the way, then forced the vial out of Deevee's hands.

"Kairn! No!" Zak cried.

The zombie Kairn ignored him. He staggered toward Evazan, who roared in triumph and reached out for the vial.

But Kairn shoved Evazan out of the way as well.

Zak saw Boba Fett firing madly. The bounty hunter seemed to have lost some of his cool calm. His back was to the wall. Every zombie that he blasted away returned again. He probably couldn't hold them off much longer.

Boba Fett fired at the closest zombie, but his shot went wild and the creature lunged at him. Its powerful hands seized his armor and lifted him off his feet. Fett tried to fire his blaster, but before he could, another zombie came up behind the first and splashed a small drop of liquid onto the first creature's face. Instantly the zombie screamed, and its grip weakened. Boba Fett regained his balance as the zombie fell limply to the floor.

Kairn had already done the same to many of the zombies in the crowd. The last of them turned on him, struggling to get the vial from his hands. Kairn fought back, dousing them with the remainder of the liquid. The zombies collapsed. But as the last one fell, it stumbled against Kairn, and some of the purple serum splashed onto him as well. He cried out, then fell forward, collapsing on top of the heap of bodies.

"Blast!" Evazan cursed.

Boba Fett dropped his blaster and pulled the vial out of Kairn's hand. A small pool of purple liquid still lay in the bottom of the glass. Fett hurled it straight at Evazan. The vial shattered as it struck the evil doctor, splashing purple liquid all across his scarred face.

Evazan screeched, dropping to his knees. He gave a violent twitch, then fell face-first to the ground.

Zak and Deevee rushed to the cell and freed Hoole and Tash. Tash threw her arms around her brother, and Zak returned her hug. Unnoticed by either of them, Hoole smiled.

Deevee was the first to speak. "I believe we can make larger quantities of this antidote and spread it around Necropolis. It should take care of the zombies terrorizing the city."

Hoole nodded. "Excellent work, Deevee. It seems you've been able to use your vast brain power after all."

The droid simulated a shrug. "A momentary distraction."

Only Pylum had escaped the violent battle. But he didn't get far. They found his lifeless body at the bottom of the stairs. His neck was broken and his face was frozen in an expression of fear.

"What do you suppose happened to him?" Zak wondered.

Hoole pointed up the stairs to the great iron doors above them. "The doors were too heavy for him to open," Hoole guessed. "He probably slipped while trying to push them and fell down the stairs."

"I would agree with your theory, Master Hoole," Deevee noted, "except that Zak and I were careful to leave the doors open."

"Well, they're closed now," Tash said.

"Then perhaps the Curse of Sycorax found its victim after all," Hoole said darkly.

With Boba Fett's help, they were able to push one of the doors open. As soon as they were out of the crypt, Hoole looked at Boba Fett. "We owe you our thanks."

"You owe nothing," the bounty hunter stated. He stood up. "I like to finish what I start. I wanted Evazan. I needed the boy to lead me to him."

Hoole's next question caught Tash's attention. "And that other matter we discussed earlier?" the Shi'ido asked Boba Fett. "Will you take that job?"

The bounty hunter gave the slightest shake of his head. "Only a fool would take that job."

Then Boba Fett ignited his jetpack and blasted away.

Epilogue

Hoole and Deevee worked with the Necropolitans to make more of the antidote. Armed with the serum, they were able to stop the zombies that roamed the city.

Before long all the dead were put to rest and returned to their proper graves. Deevee devised a means to inject the serum into the soil to make sure no boneworms accidentally revived any bodies yet untouched. The dead would never again rise to trouble Necropolis.

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In a new cemetery at the edge of Necropolis, Zak and Tash stood over a single grave. Kairn's name was inscribed on the headstone.

Zak sighed.

"Are you all right?" his sister asked.

"I think so," he replied. "It's just so sad that he was taken away in the first place. Its unfair-just like Mom and Dad." He shook his head. "I've realized something, though. I kept wishing we could have said goodbye to Mom and Dad, but I don't think it would have made the pain go away. And besides, it wasn't

really necessary." He put his hand on his heart. "They're never really gone if I keep their memories here."

***

Sometime later Uncle Hoole and Deevee picked them up in their new ship- the Shroud.

"Ugh," Tash said. "Are we really taking Evazan's old ship?"

"It was the only ship available in our price range," Hoole replied.

"It's prime!" Zak said, his eyes lighting up for the first time in days.

"Can we at least clean it up and change the name?" Tash asked.

Deevee said, "We can certainly clean it up. But in many cultures, changing a ship's name is bad luck."

"More superstitions," Zak snorted.

"If you dislike superstitions, then you will like this common sense," Hoole said. "I'm considering taking you to the nearest medical facility, Zak."

"What for? I'm fine!"

Hoole frowned. "Perhaps. But we still don't understand everything about Evazan's experiments. You were exposed to his chemicals, and you encountered the boneworms."

Zak shook his head. "Please, Uncle Hoole, the last thing I want after all we've been through is to have doctors poking and prodding me. That serum worked on dead bodies. I mean, do I look like a zombie?"

For a moment Hoole was lost in thought. Then he said, "Perhaps you are right. But I agree only on the condition that you inform me the moment you experience any illness."

"Deal!" Zak said. "Now, where's the engine room on this thing?"

Zak found a set of tools in the storage bay and then made his way back to the maintenance hatch and popped it open. He

smiled happily as he saw the tangled mass of wires and cables. He'd have a great time taking this system apart and putting it back together.

"Me, a zombie?" Zak muttered. "What is he thinking? I haven't felt this good in days."

Zak reached for a hydrospanner, then dropped it as his body gave a sudden, uncontrollable twitch....

Book Three
Planet Plague

Prologue

With a crackle of energy the image solidified before the scientist's eyes. It was only a hologram, but it was a hologram of the most powerful being the galaxy had ever known.

It was the Emperor himself.

Although the scientist was seated at his control module, at the center of his own network of power, he trembled. He could order the deaths of hundreds if he wished. With his terrible knowledge he could engineer nightmares. But as powerful as the scientist was, the Emperor could snuff him out with little more than a thought.

"What is thy bidding, my lord?" the scientist asked in a trembling voice.

"Your enemies have gained a distinct advantage." Beneath the hood of his plain black robe, the Emperor's ancient face looked wrinkled and frail. But his voice, even though it was beamed from a thousand light-years away, still had evil power. "Failure has become a possibility."

The scientist shuddered. As always the Emperor seemed to learn of events almost before they occurred. He already knew that an intruder named Hoole, along with his droid and two young humans, had ruined the scientist's experiment on

D'vouran, the living planet. They had also destroyed his work with the undead on Necropolis.

"M-My lord," the scientist said as confidently as he could manage. "I assure you these incidents have not delayed my work. Hoole is only an overly curious anthropologist, and the two humans are only children. They cannot possibly know our intentions."

"Do not underestimate the resourcefulness of your enemies." The Emperor's eyes darkened. "That was Grand Moff Tarkin's mistake when he built the Death Star."

The scientist bowed. The Death Star-a battle station equipped with a planet-destroying laser-was supposed to have been the cornerstone of the Empire's Doctrine of Fear. But the Rebels had managed to destroy it. The scientist would not make the same mistakes as the Death Star's creator. "My lord, I swear, the next phase of Project Starscream will be delivered on schedule."

The Emperor gave a slight nod. "See to it. Personally." The ruler's image vanished.

The scientist stood up and regained his composure. He dared not disappoint the Emperor. He would handle the next phase of Project Starscream personally. And if Hoole somehow interfered, the scientist would deal with him personally, too.

The scientist smiled. He knew that Hoole would never suspect that *he* was the enemy.

Chapter One

Someone was pounding on the door.

"Tash, open up!" It was the voice of her brother, Zak.

"Go away," she warned.

"Come on, it can't be that bad," he argued.

"You think?" Tash yelled through the wall of the room. "Wait until you start getting them." She heard Zak sigh and walk away.

Tash stared at her reflection in the small mirror and groaned.

Tash was thirteen years old. She'd always thought it wouldn't happen to her until she turned fifteen or sixteen.

"There you go," she muttered, "before your time as usual."

She stared at the four red splotches on her face as if glaring would scare them away. But they weren't going anywhere. They sat in the middle of her face, framed by her blonde hair. They were as noticeable as orbital beacons.

To Tash, it was amazing that the intelligent species of the galaxy had learned to travel from one end of the stars to the other, create droids that were as intelligent as humans or any other organic creature, but still no one had come up with a cure for every teenage human's nightmare.

Zits.

She was in the main refresher on board the ship *Shroud*, on which she traveled with her brother, Zak, their uncle Hoole, and

his assistant droid DV- 9, or Deevee for short. The main 'fresher had the best lighting, and Tash wanted to see just how big her pimples had grown.

Someone pounded on the door again. "Tash!" Zak was back. "Come on, I'm not feeling well. I need the medkit."

"All right!" she said. She opened the door and stared, daring Zak to say something about her face.

But Zak hardly noticed. He went right to the medkit, opened it, and took out two pain relievers, which he quickly swallowed.

"Did Uncle Hoole say you could have those?" she asked.

"Yeah." Zak nodded. "I asked him."

She noticed that her brother's face looked flushed, and he seemed a little sluggish. Zak was a year younger than she was. Normally he was chaotic, unpredictable, and fun-loving. *Not* sluggish.

"Are you getting sick?"

"No way," he responded. "Just a headache from listening to Deevee's lessons. I'm going back to the cockpit. By the way," he added as he went into the hall, "that pimple on your chin is about to go nova!"

Tash grimaced. So much for sympathizing with him. If he was feeling good enough to insult her, he was feeling good enough, period.

Tash went to her cabin and shut the door. The best thing to do about pimples was to wait them out. She had some important work to do in her cabin anyway.

She sat at her small desk, skimming the galactic communications network called the HoloNet on the computer terminal. It was sometimes hard to get a connection in deep space, but Tash had spent hours Net-skimming, and she'd found a way to bounce a computer link off of a deep-space station thirty light-years away, then to planetary antennae in the Corellian system, and finally into the Deep Core Worlds, where the central HoloNet was established.

Tash typed her code name into a message:

SEARCHER CALLING FORCEFLOW.

ForceFlow was another HoloNet explorer whom Tash had met over a year ago. ForceFlow had introduced Tash to the legends of the Jedi Knights, who had been the protectors of the galaxy before the rise of the Empire. She didn't know ForceFlow's real name, but she did know that he or she had access to a lot of information.

Tash wasn't looking for information on the Jedi today. She had decided to ask about something more personal.

She was going to ask ForceFlow about her uncle.

In the six months that she and Zak had lived with him, Hoole had refused to tell them anything about himself or his work. But over the past few weeks several people had hinted that Hoole was involved in the Empire's shadow world of criminals and assassins. Contacting ForceFlow was a long shot, but people in strange places seemed to know their uncle, and Tash's curiosity had gotten the better of her.

After a moment, a line of text appeared on her computer screen.

FORCEFLOW HERE.

HI, *she typed.*

I HAVE A QUESTION FOR YOU. IT'S PRIVATE.

A line appeared in response.

WAIT. I AM CODING OUR TRANSMISSION.

There was a pause.

When the text continued, it was highlighted in blue, indicating that the HoloNet link had changed.

IMPERIAL WATCH-DOGS ON MY TAIL. CAN'T TAKE ANY CHANCES.

Tash knew that ForceFlow often posted information on the HoloNet that the Empire considered illegal. Even the Jedi lore

that she had first discovered was outlawed, but ForceFlow had uploaded it anyway. For that reason ForceFlow was often hard to reach, and always very secretive. Tash typed back,

IS IT SAFE FOR US TO TALK?

FOR NOW. NO ONE CAN BREAK MY CODES.

GREAT. I WANT TO ASK YOU ABOUT-

But Tash was unable to continue. She nearly fell off her chair as the *Shroud* lurched crazily in space.

Chapter Two

For a split second the power was cut off and the lights went out, plunging Tash into darkness. A moment later the lights came back on, but her delicate HoloNet connection had been lost.

"Oh, laser burn," she muttered under her breath. "Zak, you're going to get it for this."

Zak had no interest in piloting, but he was a born tinkerer. Tash would have bet a year's worth of Octavian fruit pudding that he was up in the cockpit right now, taking the console apart.

The ship shook again, and Tash jumped up from her desk, slipping out the automatic door as soon as it opened and hurrying toward the cockpit.

"What's going on up here?" she demanded as she entered the control room. She half-expected to see the navicomputer spread out in pieces on the floor.

Instead she saw Zak slumped over the controls. His head was buried in his folded arms, his face hidden behind his uncontrollable mop of brown hair.

"Zak!" she yelled.

At the sound of her voice, Zak slowly lifted his head and blinked. "Hey, Tash," he said drowsily. "I must have dozed off."

"By the look of things, I would say you fainted," said a low voice behind Tash.

Uncle Hoole had come up behind her without making a sound. Hoole was a member of the Shi'ido species. They were tall, gray humanoids, and stealth was the least of their gifts. The Shi'ido were shape-shifters.

The Shi'ido studied Zak with his dark eyes, and his narrow gray face wrinkled into a frown. "Are you feeling all right?"

Zak sat up straight. His eyelids drooped, and there was a sheen of sweat on his forehead. He still managed a smile. "Me? Sure. I'm prime."

The *Shroud*'s engines let out a groan of distress. Hoole slipped past Tash and examined the readouts quickly. "You laid your head down on the reverse power coupling controls," Hoole said. "You are flooding too much fuel into the hyperdrive system." Hoole flipped a few switches, and the *Shroud* settled into a smooth flight pattern.

Zak rubbed his eyes and tried to shake his head clear. "Wow, talk about an afternoon nap."

"Try midmorning nap," Tash replied, pointing at the chronometer. Although they were in deep space, the ship's chronometer kept GST, or Galactic Standard Time.

Zak shrugged. "I haven't been this tired since we hiked to the top of the Triplehorn mountains back on Alderaan."

Tash and Uncle Hoole exchanged concerned glances. Zak had been through a lot recently. On their last planetary stop, he had been kidnapped by a wanted criminal named Evazan who was working on some bizarre experiments to bring the dead back to life. Eventually Tash and Hoole had been able to save Zak and to defeat Evazan with the help of the bounty hunter Boba Fett. In fact, they had gotten away in the criminal's own ship, the *Shroud*, in which they now flew.

Despite the terror he'd witnessed, Zak seemed to come out of that frightening experience without any serious harm. Now, however, he looked terrible.

"No way," Zak said, when Tash suggested that what he'd been through might be making him sick. "I'm telling you, I'm as

shipshape as an Imperial cruiser. " He jumped up and spun unsteadily around on one foot, turning back to face his sister. "I just needed a little sleep, that's all." As if to prove it, Zak wriggled his way past Tash and Hoole and bounded down the corridor to the *Shroud*'s main lounge.

Hoole stared after him. "I'm afraid I have not been around humans long enough to understand your physiology," he said to Tash. "Is this common?"

"I don't know," Tash said. "Back on Alderaan, Mom always seemed to know if we were sick or not."

Tash felt a twinge in her heart when she mentioned her mother. Her parents were dead, thanks to the Empire. They had been on the planet Alderaan when it was blasted into rubble by the Death Star six months ago. Tash tried to swallow a sudden lump in her throat. "I think... I think if she were here she'd say Zak was coming down with the flu or something."

"Let us hope it is nothing worse than that," Hoole said. "Zak was in Evazan's hands for some time before we reached him."

"Do you think Evazan might have done something to Zak that we don't know about?"

"I'm not sure," the Shi'ido said, almost to himself. "Let us go see what DV-9 has found in Evazan's computer files."

Evazan was also known as Dr. Death, and his mark was everywhere on the ship he had once owned. The corridors were dark and gloomy. The simple couches in the main lounge were torn and gouged. Beyond the lounge lay a small science laboratory. Hoole and his assistant droid, DV-9, had thrown away specimen jars full' of strange matter and cleaned up as much of the lab as they could, but the walls and countertops were still stained with things Tash did not want to think about.

Mechanically, however, the *Shroud* was a first-rate ship, with a high-powered computer system and memory banks filled to capacity with information.

Entering the lab, Tash and Hoole found Deevee at work on the computers, with Zak hovering behind him. "Zak, you should be in bed," Tash said.

"But look what Deevee's found," he replied.

Deevee had been designed to imitate human functions. He cocked his silver-plated head to one side. "Indeed, this is extremely curious."

"Have you been able to access the files?" Hoole asked.

"In a manner of speaking," Deevee replied. "The files were protected by a security password. My complex logic circuits were a bit rusty from lack of use." The droid glanced disapprovingly at Tash and Zak. Deevee had served as Hoole's research assistant for years. But the day Hoole had volunteered to be guardian of his niece and nephew, Deevee had been assigned as their caretaker, a job he didn't enjoy much. He jumped at any chance to perform the real scientific research he was programmed to do. "But I managed to get *some* real work done." The droid straightened with pride. "It was an extremely complex and difficult password to decipher, but, as you know..."

Here it comes, Tash thought.

"...my computer brain is extremely adaptable to *real* work such as this, and I was able to decode the password."

"It's something called Project Starscream," Zak said. "Then we can read the files?" Tash asked.

Deevee looked suddenly deflated. "Well, no. This Evazan must have been quite paranoid. Not only did he install a password, he wrote all the files in code."

Tash peeked around Hoole's shoulder as he studied the computer screen. Lines of gibberish and strings of numbers ran from left to right continuously.

"Can you break this code?" Hoole asked.

"I'm uncertain," the droid confessed.

"What?" Tash couldn't resist joking. "Even with your supercomputer brain? "

Deevee sniffed. "Not even a protocol droid could translate this language. It's far beyond my capacity. I'm afraid I couldn't get any further than the words *Project Starscream*."

"What do you suppose Project Starscream is?" Tash asked.

"Probably none of our concern, I'm sure," Hoole said.

"I bet I could break the code," Zak bragged. "No problem."

"You can barely stand up," Tash said.

"Tash is right," Hoole said. "Zak, I suggest you go to your room and lie down. A real rest may do you good."

To Tash's surprise, Zak didn't argue. He just nodded and left the lounge. As soon as Zak was gone, Tash turned to Hoole. "If Zak is really sick, the cure might be in the files."

She didn't mention her other reason for wanting to decode the files: Zak had learned that Evazan was conducting his terrible experiments for someone in the Empire. It had occurred to her that the files might contain information about Imperial activities, information she could use for revenge.

Revenge was not something Tash had ever thought about before. At home on Alderaan, she had never had any enemies, and she always tried to forgive friends who accidentally hurt or upset her.

But that had been before the Empire ruined her life. In one merciless moment, the Emperor's Death Star had wiped out her friends, her family, her entire world. As the shock of the tragedy wore off, Tash's grief had started to turn to anger. Lately she had begun to think about ways of getting back at the Empire. For some time now she had been dreaming of becoming a Jedi Knight and waging a war to defeat the Empire.

But the Jedi were extinct. They had been hunted down and destroyed by the Empire. Tash knew she would have to find a different way to battle the Imperials, and she thought the files might give her a weapon. If she could decode the documents, then give them to the Rebel Alliance, she could strike a blow against the murderers who had destroyed her homeworld.

"You are right about Zak, of course," Hoole replied. "But I'm not sure how we will break this code."

"I know someone who can do it," Tash said. "ForceFlow."

Hoole's face grew sterner than usual. "Tash, I know the HoloNet can be a source of entertainment and education, but I can't say I approve of the friendships you acquire. You never know whom you may be talking to. This ForceFlow may be a prankster or a troublemaker."

"No, he's not!" Tash said. She stopped herself. She knew ForceFlow was honest, but she also knew that Uncle Hoole would only tolerate so much arguing. "He does know a lot about codes. It can't hurt to try," she told him.

"Very well," Hoole said with a sigh. "But I insist that you immediately come to me with whatever information he gives you." He gave Tash a datadisk filled with the coded files. Returning to her cabin, Tash sat down at her computer screen.

Punching in commands, Tash tried to regain her connection to the HoloNet. She typed in her HoloNet code name, and then typed a message:

TO FORCEFLOW. I NEED YOUR HELP.

If anyone could help her, ForceFlow could. He——or she——often broadcast information about illegal Imperial activities and other political messages. ForceFlow was the kind of person Tash would have ignored six months ago. But six months ago her parents were alive.

Tash was sure that ForceFlow was a Rebel on the run from the Empire.

GREETINGS, SEARCHER. *The message flashed across the screen.* GLAD YOU'RE BACK.

Tash typed quickly.

NEED FILES DECODED. ALSO NEED INFORMATION ON "PROJECT STARSCREAM." MAY BE IMPERIAL DOCUMENTS.

There was a pause. Then a return message flashed:

NOT SURE IT'S SAFE. IMPERIALS MAY BE MONITORING MY FREQUENCIES.

Tash was in a hurry to learn who was behind the experiments, and she wanted to know if Zak was in serious danger. She typed,

THIS IS URGENT.

UPLOAD NOW. BUT IF I'M DETECTED, I'LL HAVE TO CUT OFF.

Tash inserted a datadisk into her computer and punched a key. Instantly, a data signal was beamed across the galaxy. Somewhere, on one of a hundred thousand worlds, the mysterious ForceFlow was receiving her data.

Suddenly her computer emitted an electronic scream. Her screen went dark. When it came back on, the words seemed to shake on the screen.

I'M BEING SCANNED! RECEIVED PART OF YOUR FILES. WILL GET BACK TO YOU!

The message ended there.

Tash wanted to send another message. What if ForceFlow needed help? If he was caught, it would be her fault.

But before she could type in another word, the door to her cabin slid open. Zak stood in the doorway. All the blood had drained from his face, and he was drenched in sweat.

"I think...," he said weakly. "I think I'm not feeling well."

Then he collapsed.

Chapter Three

Less than an hour later Tash sat at her brother's bedside, watching him toss and turn in his sleep. She had cried out when he fell, which brought Hoole and Deevee running. They had quickly carried Zak to his bed.

"Isn't there anything we can do?" she asked.

Deevee replied, "There are many medical devices on board this ship, but considering the fact that Evazan was called Dr. Death, I don't think we should use them on Zak."

"What about you, Deevee? Don't you have a medical program?"

The droid shook his silver-domed head. "I have data files on the medical practices of thousands of worlds, but my own skills are limited to the first aid I learned when Master Hoole adopted you."

Hoole's rigid face softened slightly. "Tash, I'm reluctant to bring up a painful subject, but do you recall what your mother did when you were ill?"

Again Tash felt a twinge. If only her mother were here! She replied, "I don't know. I was never really sick."

"Never?" Hoole questioned.

She shook her head. "Not that I remember. I just never seemed to catch anything. But when Zak wasn't feeling well, she used to check his temperature. "

Tash put her wrist against Zak's forehead. His skin was hot, and damp with perspiration. "He's burning up. I think he's got a fever, Uncle Hoole."

The Shi'ido put a hand on her shoulder. "We mustn't take chances, Tash. We are less than fifteen hours away from the Mah Dala Infirmary on the planet Gobindi."

"Infirmary?" she asked. "You mean, a hospital?"

Hoole nodded. "The Infirmary on Gobindi is said to be the finest medical facility in this part of the galaxy. It is also run by an old colleague of mine in the *Imperial* Biological Welfare Department."

Imperial Biological Welfare Department? Tash wanted nothing to do with Imperials.

But beside her, Zak moaned in his sleep. His temperature seemed to be rising by the minute. He was definitely ill, and any help——even Imperial help——would be welcome.

Hoole turned to his assistant droid. "Deevee, program the *Shroud*'s navicomputer to take us to Gobindi immediately."

"Right away, Master Hoole." The droid hurried to set the coordinates as Hoole said, "Tash, I have some things I must do before we reach Gobindi. Please call me at once if there is any change in Zak's condition."

Tash nodded.

Alone, Tash watched her brother's fitful sleep. She couldn't help thinking that the Empire was responsible for this in some way. Minute by minute, Tash felt her anger grow, until it burned hotter than Zak's fever.

"You're going to be fine, Zak," she whispered, patting his hand. "You're going to be just fine. And I promise that somehow I'm going to make the Empire pay for this."

After a while Deevee came to replace Tash.

"We are still several hours away from Gobindi. Why don't you rest for a little while?" he said, his electronic voice imitating concern so perfectly that Tash was sure the droid felt emotions. "I have added some basic medical skills to my program, and I'm confident I can care for young Zak."

Reluctantly Tash allowed Deevee to take her place, but she did not rest. Instead she went straight to her cabin and logged onto her computer.

MESSAGE TO FORCEFLOW.

She waited. There was no response.

She decided to post a message anyway, hoping that he would pick it up soon and send a reply.

FORCEFLOW. I NEED INFORMATION RIGHT AWAY. WILL TRY TO CONTACT YOU AS SOON AS WE REACH THE PLANET GOBINDI. REPLY SOON!

She transmitted her message, hoping that her mysterious contact would receive it before Zak grew any sicker.

***

Three hours later, the *Shroud* prepared to drop out of hyperspace into the Gobindi system. Tash sat next to her uncle. He had asked her to act as his copilot, while Deevee remained by Zak's side, ready to use the new skills he had just programmed into his computer brain.

Uncle Hoole deactivated the hyperdrive, and Tash watched out the forward viewport as the stars changed from the white streaks of hyperspace to the twinkling pinpoints of realspace.

And then they were blotted out by the shadow of an Imperial Star Destroyer.

Collision alarms blared in the *Shroud*'s cockpit. Tash stifled a cry as Hoole jerked the ship's navigational stick hard to the left and the *Shroud* plunged down and away from the Destroyer. The Star Destroyer's huge, wedge like shape cut through the fabric of space like a blade as it passed above them.

Hoole was still trying to regain control of the *Shroud* when the first laser shot streaked past them, just meters from the *Shroud*'s hull. Another shot followed, and only the Shi'ido's flight pattern saved them from becoming a ball of exploding gases.

"Why are they firing at us?" Tash yelled.

Hoole's voice was tight and controlled. "I don't know."

"Raise our deflector shields!" she urged.

"If I do, they will think we want to fight or escape."

Another laser shot flared nearby, even closer than the one before. "Tash, " Hoole ordered, "open a comm channel. Tell them we mean no harm."

Tash activated the *Shroud*'s comm system, but before she could send her message a voice blared over the speakers.

"Attention, unidentified ship. You have been targeted as a pirate ship. Prepare to be boarded or destroyed!"

"Pirates? Why do they think we're pirates?" Tash shouted.

"Reply to their message," Hoole said with amazing calm. "Tell them we are not pirates and we will cooperate."

Once more Tash activated the *Shroud*'s comm system, but all the channels were filled with harsh static. "I think they're jamming our signal," she said.

Hoole focused on the controls but managed to mutter, "They hailed us as an unidentified ship. Aren't we broadcasting a telesponder code?"

Tash had a lot to learn about star piloting, but she knew that telesponder codes were the automatic signals all starships sent out so that other ships could identify them. The only people who didn't use telesponder codes were pirates and smugglers.

Tash searched the control console for the appropriate switch and found that it had been shut down. She realized what had

happened. "Zak must have accidentally turned it off when he passed out up here." She flipped the switch. "I hope this helps."

Tash expected that it would only take a few seconds for the telesponder to begin transmitting and for someone aboard the enormous Imperial warship to receive the code. But she did not expect the Destroyer to stop firing and suddenly veer off.

The Imperial voice broadcast over their loudspeaker once again, and this time it was filled with concern. "Apologies. A mistaken transmission. You are clear to proceed."

Without another word, the Star Destroyer sliced its way along the space lane.

"What was that all about?" Tash asked.

Hoole gave the slightest shrug. "No harm was done. Let's make haste for the Gobindi system."

*No harm done!*Tash thought. *They could have destroyed us, and they hardly gave it a thought. The Imperials don't do anything but hurt people.*

***

As the *Shroud*'s sublight engines propelled them through the star system, Tash and Uncle Hoole saw three more Star Destroyers, all bristling with weapons and cutting across the orbital paths of the Gobindi system's twelve planets.

"Four Star Destroyers," Uncle Hoole murmured to himself. "Almost a fleet. Something important must be happening in the area to attract so many ships."

But now that the *Shroud* was broadcasting its telesponder code, none of the Imperial war ships challenged them again.

Finally the *Shroud* plunged toward Gobindi, the fifth planet of the system, a massive green globe half covered in thick cloud layers. From orbit, Gobindi looked like a huge jungle.

As they approached, Tash felt the planet's gravity grab hold and draw them in quickly. Hoole handled their ship expertly, guiding it toward a growing spot of white in the thick carpet of green vegetation. "That is Mah Dala, the capital city of Gobindi,"

Hoole said. "I sent a message ahead to Dr. Kavafi, my colleague at the Imperial Biological Welfare Division. He is expecting us."

The *Shroud* swooped down over Mah Dala. The city seemed to be made up of many-leveled pyramids with flat tops. Elaborate bridges connected the buildings in beautifully intricate designs.

"The Gobindi are amazing architects," Tash observed.

"Were," Hoole responded. "The Gobindi themselves vanished years ago. No one knows what happened to them. The only city they left behind was Mah Dala. I've always wanted to visit the ruins here but never found the time."

"Who lives here now?" she asked.

Hoole banked the *Shroud*, headed toward a landing bay, and answered, "The Empire opened the planet up to colonization a few years ago, and many different species moved into Mah Dala. This area of space gets a lot of traffic, and the hyperspace lanes are quite close. It's something of a cosmopolitan place now, I believe. And, of course, the Imperials are here."

"Of course," Tash muttered.

***

The *Shroud* settled onto a landing platform that sat atop one of the flat pyramids. The minute the ship rested on its landing gear, Tash unbuckled her crash webbing and hurried back to the main lounge. Deevee was holding Zak in his mechanical arms. Her brother was wrapped in a blanket, still sweating and mumbling to himself. He looked half-awake.

"Zak?" Tash said softly. "How do you feel?"

In misery he looked up at his sister. "My head's on fire, Tash."

Hoole activated the hatchway. The door flew open, and Tash found herself looking into the concerned face of a human male about fifty years old. He had brown hair, lightly salted with gray, and warm blue eyes. He wore a brown Imperial uniform with the letters "IBWD" stitched over the left breast, and he was holding

a medical datapad in one hand. Behind him stood two technicians pushing a hover-gurney.

The man looked past Tash and smiled. "Dr. Hoole. It's good to see you again."

Hoole reached forward and shook the man's hand quickly. "Dr. Kavafi. I know you are busy. Thank you for seeing to this personally."

"Think nothing of it. Let's see the patient to the Infirmary, shall we?"

He nodded to the two technicians, who quickly took Zak from Deevee's arms and laid him gently on the hover-gurney. Kavafi quickly examined Zak, then grabbed a comlink from his belt and spoke into it. "Medichamber six, this is Dr. Kavafi. I'm bringing in a patient with a high fever. From the looks of things, I would say it is a low-grade virus. Have the diagnostic droid standing by."

Quickly the technicians grabbed hold of the hover-gurney and pushed it toward a waiting medishuttle. Tash, Hoole, and Deevee followed Dr. Kavafi.

"Is he going to be all right?" Tash asked Dr. Kavafi. The doctor smiled. "Don't worry, young lady," he said. "Everything is going to be just fine."

Tash suddenly remembered ForceFlow. Had he ever replied to her message? If he did have information regarding Project Starscream, they might use it to help the doctors cure Zak.

"I, uh, forgot something," she told Hoole, then quickly turned back toward the ship.

"Hurry," Hoole ordered. "We need to get Zak to the hospital right away."

Tash leaped back into the ship and headed straight for her cabin. Inside, she powered up her computer terminal.

There was a message waiting for her. It had arrived just before their encounter with the Star Destroyer.

Tash's blood ran cold when she read the words on her computer screen.

SEARCHER, THIS IS FORCEFLOW. HAVE INFORMATION REGARDING PROJECT STARSCREAM. WHATEVER YOU DO, STAY AWAY FROM GOBINDI. STAY AWAY FROM GOBINDI!

Chapter Four

Tash stared at the words on the screen, hoping that somehow they would change. But they didn't.

STAY AWAY FROM GOBINDI!

Why?

What did Project Starscream have to do with Gobindi? Tash needed to communicate with ForceFlow again, and quickly.

"Tash!" Uncle Hoole called from outside the ship. "Hurry!"

Hesitantly Tash powered down her computer. The message faded away.

STAY AWAY FROM GOBINDI!

Whatever ForceFlow's message meant, it had come too late.

***

Moments later the medishuttle zoomed smoothly across the level tops of Mah Dala's pyramidlike stone buildings.

Tash sat at her brother's side, pressing a cool, damp cloth to his forehead. Hoole and Deevee stayed to one side, quietly talking.

Tash spared a glance away from her brother. Over Hoole's shoulder, she looked out the shuttle's viewport. Structures made of enormous stone tables, each one slightly smaller than the one beneath it, climbed into the sky. The sides of the buildings looked like massive steps, and she imagined giants using the buildings as stairways to space.

The bridges connecting the pyramids looked like tiny threads that held the stone giants together. Tash guessed that the highest of the bridges were suspended three hundred meters above the ground.

"Magnificent, aren't they?" Dr. Kavafi said with a smile. "They are called ziggurats. The Gobindi were obviously powerful builders."

"Impressive," Hoole said. "Kavafi, once we are sure Zak is recovering, I would like to make arrangements to study these ruins."

Tash felt anger prick her insides. Was Hoole planning to do anthropological research while he was here? Didn't he care about Zak?

"Indeed," Deevee added, eager to join any conversation about ancient civilizations. "I have done only preliminary work on Gobindi, but I understand that the natives built these towers so that they could escape the thick jungles below. Dr. Kavafi, is it true they only lived in the highest levels of the ziggurats?"

Tash wished they would all be quiet. She had no interest in lost civilizations or architecture. All she wanted was for Zak to get better.

Beside her, Kavafi shrugged at the droid's question. "Anthropology is Hoole's area, not mine. But that seems to be the case. However some of the ziggurats have no inner chambers at all. They are just artificial mountains. The tops of others contain many rooms and hallways, but below those levels they are mostly solid rock. There is nowhere to live down near the bottom. Apparently the jungle is too thick, and the wildlife is not always harmless."

"The Gobindi must have been quite highly advanced scientifically, to build——"

"I'm sorry," Kavafi said, still monitoring Zak's vital signs. "Perhaps we should wait until Zak here can join the conversation."

The droid stopped talking. Tash looked at Kavafi out of the corner of her eye. That comment almost made her like him, even if he was an Imperial.

"Ah, here we are," Kavafi said.

Dr. Kavafi pointed out the window of the shuttle. Following his gaze, Tash found herself staring at the biggest building she had ever seen. It was shaped like the other ziggurats, but it was almost twice as large as any of the buildings around it. At the very top, Imperial engineers had built a modern steelcrete tower. The tower must have been twenty stories high, but it looked like little more than a small cap sitting atop the enormous ziggurat.

"That newer structure is the Infirmary," Kavafi explained. "Below it are the ruins of the oldest and largest ziggurat on Gobindi."

The shuttle banked smoothly and landed on top of the ziggurat. Tash stood at Zak's side as the two assistants guided the hover-gurney out of the shuttle and immediately headed toward the Infirmary.

When Tash stepped out of the shuttle, she felt as though she'd walked right into a steam bath. The air was moist and hot, and so thick she could almost taste it as she breathed in. In moments she and Hoole were both sweating from the heat, but because the air was so moist, their perspiration didn't dry. Their clothing soon stuck to their skin. Even Deevee appeared uncomfortable as they hurried across the top of the ziggurat to the Infirmary.

"This humidity is extraordinary," the droid said. "I can already feel my outer covering starting to rust."

Kavafi nodded. "And this is a good day. Most days are hotter and wetter than this."

Tash ignored the heat, searching for signs of danger. But only the wide flat surface of the ziggurat stretched out before them, with the gray tower rising above. What had ForceFlow's message meant? Was he warning her about Imperials? Was there some other danger?

Suddenly Zak moaned in his sleep. "Mom." Tash bit her lip. Zak's face was still bloodless and even in sleep, he looked miserable.

"Halt!"

Tash looked up.

They were surrounded by Imperial stormtroopers.

Chapter Five

There were at least two squads of stormtroopers in white armor standing at the wide doorways to the Infirmary. The blank masks of their helmets looked as terrifying and impersonal as the Empire itself.

One of the stormtroopers raised a weapon, and Tash thought he was going to open fire. But instead, the weapon merely glowed briefly as the trooper pointed it at the newcomers.

"All clear," he reported. "Energy scan reveals no weapons."

"You are clear to proceed," another trooper told them, clearing a path to the door.

"For a hospital, you seem quite well guarded," Hoole observed.

Kavafi looked almost embarrassed. "Unfortunate but necessary. This star system has experienced increased pirate activity in the past few weeks. Smugglers and spacejackers trying to steal medical supplies. We've had to expand our security."

They passed the stormtroopers and reached the front of the gray tower. Over the doors, the letters "IBWD" had been set in black onyx.

"Welcome," Kavafi said, "to the Imperial Biological Welfare Division."

Tash followed closely as Zak was carried through the doors of the steelcrete tower. The Infirmary's ground floor was a vast lobby filled with turbolift banks and people scurrying to and fro. Most of them were human, and most of them wore Imperial uniforms, but there was a smattering of alien species. Since the Empire rarely employed anyone but humans, Tash guessed that the aliens must be patients seeking treatment at the Infirmary.

They reached a turbolift and hastily pushed Zak's hover-gurney inside. Kavafi turned to the lift's control panel and said, "Floor ten. Override any other floor calls."

"Acknowledged," said a mechanical voice, and the turbolift rose quickly.

While most turbolifts still used a simple push-button system, Tash had seen many lifts like this one before. The lift car itself was actually a class-four service droid. It responded to simple voice commands and was programmed to shuttle occupants up and down the turbolift shaft.

The droid-powered lift took them up to the tenth floor, where Zak was moved into a medichamber with calm efficiency. For a few moments the room was a blur of motion as technicians took samples of his blood, hooked up monitors to his chest and forehead, and prepared medication.

Kavafi held up an enormous needle and examined a dark fluid within it. "What's that?" Tash asked nervously.

"Just something to help him sleep," Kavafi said. "Sometimes sleep is the best medicine of all."

He bent down and prepared to insert the needle. Tash shuddered as the needle slipped under his skin. As soon as he'd given Zak the injection, Kavafi checked the monitors, nodded to himself, and sighed.

"Is he going to be all right?" Hoole asked. Despite the fact that his own nephew now lay in a hospital bed, Hoole's voice was as steady and businesslike as ever.

"Oh, yes," Kavafi replied confidently. "We will run some tests to be sure, but the early indications are that Zak has a strain of influenza."

"I thought you said he had a virus," Tash replied.

Kavafi smiled patiently. Tash realized that he was trying to make her feel comfortable. She appreciated it, but her brother was ill, and she was standing inside an Imperial facility guarded by Imperial soldiers and run by Imperial doctors. Even if they were Hoole's friends, she was anything but comfortable.

"Influenza *is* a virus," Kavafi explained. "There are millions of viruses throughout the galaxy. Each one of them causes different problems, sometimes quite serious ones."

Tash swallowed. "Is——Is he going to——"

"No, no!" Kavafi said, putting a hand on her shoulder. "He will be fine. Usually a person's body can fight off the virus after a little while. Would you like to *see* what is causing your brother to be ill?"

Tash was surprised. "You mean, you can see it?"

"Not with your eye, but with this." Kavafi picked up a visor off the desk. The lenses were deep red, with tiny control switches mounted on the sides. "This is an electroscope. It allows you to see objects a thousand times smaller than the tip of a hydrospanner. Right now it's programmed to find and locate viruses. Here."

He pointed to a small glass plate sitting on a counter. The plate contained a sample of red fluid. Tash stared at the small drop of fluid as she put on the visor and felt on the side panel for the power switch. When she flipped it, the medichamber vanished. Tash found herself peering into a world of swirling red currents. In the center of the currents was a large mass that moved and wriggled as though it was alive. Suddenly six ominous-looking creatures swam into view. They had large, faceless heads covered with thick strands of what looked like hair. Their bodies tapered into long, thin tails that they used to swim about in the red fluid. Without pause the six creatures

swarmed the wriggling mass. Five of the creatures succeeded in piercing its membrane. They forced themselves inside the mass, eating away at it.

As Tash watched, the five creatures suddenly trembled, and then they split apart, becoming ten organisms. And then twenty, and then forty! They were replicating faster than Tash could count them.

The sixth wriggling creature, the one that hadn't succeeded in getting inside the floating mass, turned, and with a sudden surge, lunged right at Tash.

"Ah!" Tash jumped back. Then she remembered she was wearing the electroscope. She was looking at the fluid on a small glass plate, magnified thousands of times.

"Startling, isn't it?" she heard Kavafi say. "Those tiny organisms are what make living beings sick. They invade the body and begin to reproduce, taking over the body's living cells."

Tash watched as more of the viruses swam into view. They seemed to be searching for something. "Are they fatal?"

"Sometimes," the doctor admitted. "But since the virus feeds off its living host, it doesn't usually want to kill it. Sometimes viruses can live and reproduce inside an animal or person for years, causing all kinds of terrible illnesses."

Tash removed the electroscope. "How do you get them?

I mean, they're too small to travel from one place to another."

The doctor nodded. "Viruses get around in all kinds of ways. Sometimes touching an infected person can give you the virus, or drinking infected water. Some viruses even float through the air."

A medical droid entered the room carrying a tray that had two needles on it. Kavafi picked up one of the needles. "Hoole, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you and your niece to endure an injection."

"For what purpose?" the Shi'ido asked. "We are not sick."

Kavafi shrugged. "Just a precaution. You and your niece may have caught the virus that Zak has, and I want to stop it before it

has time to take hold in your system." He held the needle out toward Hoole.

Hoole stuck one long, thin arm out from beneath his blue robe. Kavafi quickly and expertly stuck the needle into the Shi'ido's arm and squeezed until all the fluid had been injected.

"Your turn," he said cheerily to Tash.

"I never catch anything," she insisted. "I never get sick."

"Better safe than sorry," he replied.

Reluctantly Tash held out her arm. She felt a quick prick as the needle poked beneath her skin, then a slight tugging as the fluid was injected into her bloodstream. For a moment the injection felt hot and stinging. Then the pain passed.

"There we are," Kavafi said cheerily. "Now all your worries are over. I will be right back."

The minute Kavafi left the room, Tash turned to the Shi'ido and whispered, "Uncle Hoole! I think something's wrong here!"

Hoole raised his eyebrows. "What?"

"Just before we left the *Shroud*, I got a message from ForceFlow. He warned us not to come to Gobindi!"

Hoole furrowed his eyebrows. "Tash, I appreciate your concern. But why should we change our plans, based on a warning from a person you have never actually met?"

Tash searched for a reply. "He's always helped me before."

Hoole said, "He is meddling in affairs he cannot possibly understand. I cannot permit you to run your life based on mysterious messages sent over the HoloNet."

"But this is an Imperial base!" Tash argued. "There are stormtroopers here!"

Hoole sighed. "I know how you feel about the Empire, and you have a right to be angry. But you have to understand that the government has officers, soldiers, and fleets of ships all across the galaxy. Most of the time they are just beings going about their daily business. If you think that every time you see stormtroopers you have uncovered a wicked Imperial plot, you will go insane with worry.

You must learn to control your suspicion, or it will control you."

"But——"

"Tash, please." Hoole looked at her sternly. "I have known Dr. Kavafi for years. He is a good scientist, dedicated to improving the lives of species kind. We are in no danger."

The tone in Hoole's voice told Tash that she should not continue the argument. She crossed her arms as if to hold in her frustration.

As she did, she felt a small pain in her left arm. She touched the tender spot where she had received the injection. "I think your friend bruised me with that needle," she muttered.

Dr. Kavafi returned just as Zak moaned loudly in his sleep. Tash reached down and wiped the sweat off his forehead. "Why is he so hot?"

"That's the human way of fighting off disease. Most viruses cannot take extreme heat, so your body automatically raises its temperature to fight back. "

Tash couldn't help thinking the worst. "But what happens if this virus actually *likes* the heat?"

Kavafi raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Well, that is a very interesting scenario. It would cause great problems for the victim, I think. Let's just hope you never encounter a virus like that."

Hoole asked, "Kavafi, is there anything else we can do?"

The doctor shook his head. "No. He will sleep for a while now. We will need to run some tests on Zak to make sure there is nothing else wrong. My best advice is for you to go out and refresh yourselves. His sedative should wear off in about an hour."

"I'm not leaving," Tash said. "What if he wakes up early?"

"I will stay with him," Uncle Hoole decided. "Tash, I want you and Deevee to find a cantina and get something to eat."

"I'm not hungry," Tash replied.

"Then at least go for a walk," the Shi'ido insisted. "Zak will be fine."

"I will take you back down," Kavafi offered. "I have business below, myself."

Tash didn't want to leave her brother, but Hoole would hear no argument. Finally she and Deevee followed Kavafi out of the room and back to the lifts. They got in and Kavafi said, "Lobby."

"Does this lift go down into the ziggurat itself?" Deevee asked excitedly.

"No, no," the doctor replied. "As I said before, some of the ziggurats have no rooms or chambers. This is one of them. I'm afraid it's just an enormous mountain of stone."

The turbolift descended with a soft whoosh, and the doors opened onto the Infirmary lobby. Tash and Deevee stepped off, but Kavafi stayed behind.

"Aren't you getting off?" Tash asked. "This is the bottom floor, isn't it?"

Kavafi paused. "Oh, of course. But I forgot my datapad upstairs. I will have to go back and get it." The doors closed.

Tash and Deevee walked out of the lobby to the edge of the ziggurat and looked down. The sides of the tower stuck out below them in jagged steps that were eventually lost in hazy clouds. Nearby, they saw a footbridge connecting this ziggurat to several others. It seemed stable, and soon they were walking along the path, hundreds of meters above the ground.

Deevee had begun a lecture on the number of lost civilizations in the galaxy, including the Massassi of Yavin Four and the Ysanna of Ossus, but Tash wasn't listening. Her eye had fallen on a shape on the bridge ahead of them. As they closed the distance, she expected its shape to become clearer... but even as close as ten meters away it looked like a blob. Its center appeared hard and somewhat firm, but around the edges, the greenish shape oozed and pulsed. Although it was lying fairly flat, the blob was slightly larger than a human being, and it had spread across the bridge in a pile of steaming ooze.

"What's that?" she asked. "Is it alive?"
Deevee didn't answer. He didn't have to.
The blob surged toward them.

Chapter Six

Tash and Deevee both scrambled backward as the blob lunged forward and landed heavily on the spot where they had been standing. The impact caused the creature to flatten out briefly, but then it gathered itself up for another spring. Rolls of squishy green gel rippled across its surface.

"Deevee, what is it?" Tash cried.

"I'm familiar with more than fifteen billion forms of life in the galaxy, " the droid replied with a hint of panic in his electronic voice, "but I've never seen anything like it.

The blob made no sound, except for the slimy slap of its wriggling, fatty skin on the surface of the bridge. Then it sprang again. Tash jumped backward, but this time Deevee was too slow. The oozing creature landed heavily against his legs, sending the droid clattering to the floor of the bridge.

"Help! Help!" Deevee tried to pry himself loose as the blob began to creep up his silver legs.

"Get off him!" Tash yelled.

Tash never knew where the man came from. He seemed to appear out of nowhere. His flight suit was clean but worn, and he wore pilot's gloves that were frayed around the edges. His features were sharp and his face looked young but very serious. The man wore a blaster at his hip, but he kept it holstered.

Without saying a word he kicked the blob with his booted foot. The blob did not react, but the man's boot sank into the wriggling skin up to the ankle. He grunted and pried himself free.

"Use your blaster!" Tash suggested.

"Don't hit me!" Deevee added.

The man ignored them both. He grabbed the upper edge of the blob in his gloved hands and yanked hard. The ooze peeled away from Deevee's metallic surface. But that only seemed to make the blob angry. It let go of its sticky grip on the droid and turned on their rescuer. Two squishy ropes of ooze——almost like arms——suddenly grabbed hold of the man.

"By the Force!" he yelled in surprise as he lost his balance. He staggered backward toward the edge of the high bridge. "I could use some help, " he grunted as he tried to lift the blob up over the bridge's guardrail.

Tash hurried to his side, but the man said, "Don't touch it! Get the droid. And hurry!" The creature's oozing limbs had almost crept up to his shoulders.

Deevee rose stiffly to his feet and shuffled over as fast as his servos would carry him. "I am not programmed to handle this," he muttered as he grabbed hold of the blob. He tried to lift it. "By the Maker, this creature is heavier than a human!" Deevee's computer brain automatically transferred more power to his upper servos, and he and the newcomer lifted the blob up and over the guardrail.

"Okay, drop it!" the man ordered, bracing himself against the rail.

Deevee let go, and the blob dropped a few feet. Two thick strands of ooze still clung to the man's shoulders, but as the blob's own weight dragged it down, the ooze ropes stretched thinner and thinner.

"Hold on!" Tash shouted.

"Good... advice!" the man grunted, pulling back against the weight of the blob. At last the strands of ooze snapped. The blob dropped. Tash watched as the creature shrank away beneath

them, finally disappearing into the jungle steam. She looked at the man, who was still panting from his efforts.

"Thanks!" was all she could manage.

"Yes, indeed!" Deevee added, picking himself up. His legs were covered in a sticky trail of green slime. "That creature would have turned me into scrap! How fortunate that you happened to be nearby."

"Yeah," the man replied. "Lucky. Did that thing touch you?" he asked Tash.

"No. Why? Are they poisonous?" Tash asked.

"Not poisonous." The man cast a nervous glance around, and held up his hands. His gloves were covered in ooze. He carefully removed them and dropped them over the side of the bridge. Tash watched them flutter toward the ground, hundreds of meters below.

Tash pointed to the weapon holstered at the man's hip. "Why didn't you just blast it?"

At that moment, a hovercar whizzed by. On its side panel, Tash caught a glimpse of the official seal of the Empire. The car zoomed away from them and toward the medical tower.

The man nodded after it. "That's why. Using a blaster might bring a different kind of bug. The *Imperial* kind." As he said this the man watched Tash closely. She had the feeling that he was trying to judge her reaction to his comment about the Empire.

"What was that thing?" she asked, looking over the side. The cries of jungle creatures floated up from below.

The man did not take his eyes off her. "As far as I know, they don't have names. *Blob* is as good a word as any, I guess. They just started creeping out of the jungle a few weeks ago. Before that no one had seen them. But then, these jungles are full of the unexpected."

"And they are allowed to roam at will?" Deevee asked indignantly.

"They seemed pretty harmless," the man replied. "And they're hard to stop. That sticky ooze allows them to climb up walls and

hang from ceilings. Even a fall from this height probably didn't kill that one."

Tash shuddered. She imagined the blob splattering onto the forest floor beneath them, then slowly gathering itself back up and making the long climb back up the ziggurat. Deevee was still in a huff. "Why, then, the local imperials should do something about them. It's an outrage."

Again the man studied Tash's reaction as he scoffed, "Imperials. What do you expect from them?"

"My name's Tash," she said. "This is DV-9, or Deevee for short."

The man shook her hand. "I'm Wedge Antilles. Where are you headed?"

Tash shrugged. "We were just going for a walk around the city. These pyramids——ziggurats——are pretty impressive."

Wedge nodded. "Listen, how about if I give you a quick walking tour?"

Tash started to reply, "Thanks, but I don't think we——"

"You'll need a guide," Wedge interrupted. "All the bridges between the ziggurats can be confusing. Sometimes I think it would take a Jedi to navigate Mah Dala." The word was like a magnet that drew Tash's attention straight to Wedge.

"You know about the Jedi?" she asked breathlessly.

The corners of Wedge's mouth turned up in a slight smile. "I've heard of them."

"I've always wanted to be one," Tash said. She turned to Deevee. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt to have a guide."

But the man's manner had triggered Deevee's cautious caretaker programming. "I'm afraid Tash's uncle would not want her to roam a new city with a complete stranger."

Wedge Antilles sighed. "Oh, well. I'm the best guide you'll find around here. I could have shown you some out-of-the-way examples of Gobindi architecture and ancient culture that you'd never find on your own, but if that's how you feel——"

"Culture?" the droid replied with sudden enthusiasm. "Well, I'm sure Master Hoole would not want Tash to miss an educational opportunity. Lead on, Master Antilles."

Wedge led them across the bridge and into the next ziggurat. This one was bustling with activity. The halls inside the flat-topped pyramid were high and wide, with many side corridors and lifts rising up and down. *If all the buildings are this well populated, Tash thought, Mah Dala must be a fairly crowded place.*

The beings inside the ziggurat came from every corner of the galaxy. Many were human, but there were also large numbers of furry Bothans, Twi'leks with skull tendrils draped across their shoulders, and dozens of other species walking, crawling, or writhing about. Tash recalled what Hoole had said: The original Gobindi had vanished, and many other species had filled the city they left behind. They stopped and sat on a bench in the middle of a central plaza as the crowd hurried past.

"This isn't much of a cultural experience," Deevee sniffed. "Crowd watching is for amateur anthropologists."

Tash ignored him. She was more interested in the man who had saved their lives. "Are you from Gobindi?" she asked.

Wedge shook his head. "No. I'm just visiting some friends. I've been here for several weeks, though. Long enough to know the city pretty well. Actually I only planned to stay a few days. But of course with the blockade and all——"

"Blockade?" Tash interrupted. "What blockade?" Yet again the man's eyes seemed to peer inside Tash's head. Tash had the distinct impression that this encounter with Wedge was no accident. It was a strange sensation, but Tash often had unexplainable feelings about people and events. Lately she'd learned to trust her intuition.

Wedge spoke matter-of-factly. "The blockade of the Gobindi system. According to the Imperial news broadcasts, pirate activity has gotten so bad that the Empire has sent a fleet of Star Destroyers to deal with the problem."

"We saw them," Tash responded. "But we didn't see any pirate ships."

Wedge snorted. "No one's ever seen any pirates here. But that doesn't matter to the Empire. They've still ordered all ships to be grounded until they've had time to hunt down the criminals. So everyone's stuck here. No one has come or gone from Gobindi in almost three weeks."

Deevee spoke up. "You must be mistaken, sir. We just arrived on Gobindi. How is that possible if there is a blockade?"

Wedge raised an eyebrow. "Only Imperials have been allowed to leave or arrive."

So that's what he's after, Tash thought. *He's trying to figure out if we're Imperials!*

"We're not Imperials," she replied hotly.

"But your ship was allowed to land——" Wedge replied.

"We're not Imperials!" she repeated. Wedge raised his eyebrows in surprise. Even Tash was surprised at how angry she sounded. She blushed. She felt foolish, not only for yelling, but for revealing her feelings to this man. She had no idea who he was.

But even so, Tash felt a strong urge that seemed to say, *Trust him.*

Caught between these two feelings, Tash said nothing. "So, what brings you to Gobindi?" Wedge asked.

"My brother's sick," she replied. "They're examining him at the Infirmary."

The man's face darkened. He clenched his jaw and said, "Listen, I'm going to tell you something, even though it might be a mistake. For all I know you could be the daughter of some high-level Imperial officer and you could get me in a lot of trouble. But..."

The fear in his voice made Tash's hair stand on end. "What?" she asked.

He nodded in the direction of the Infirmary. "In the past few weeks, no one has come out of there alive."

Chapter Seven

"What do you mean no one's come out of the Infirmary alive?" Tash cried.

But at that moment a siren sounded shrilly in their ears. It was followed by a white-paneled hovercar that swooped into the plaza, scattering the crowds of pedestrians. A squad of stormtroopers leaped out of the back before it even stopped. With military precision the troopers singled out a specific being in the startled crowd. Tash saw that the creature-with its green skin, large purple eyes, and narrow snout——was a Rodian. Four of the troopers pounced on him. The leader of the stormtrooper squad activated a loudspeaker built into his armor:

> ATTENTION, CITIZENS OF MAH DALA. THE BEING 'WE ARE TAKING INTO CUSTODY HAS BEEN IDENTIFIED AS A SUSPECTED PIRATE AND SMUGGLER. HE IS BEING TAKEN INTO CUSTODY FOR THE SAFETY OF ALL!

The stormtroopers dragged the Rodian kicking and screaming to the hovercar. "I'm not a pirate! I'm not a pirate!" the Rodian yelled. But the troopers ignored him and tossed him into the waiting vehicle, then jumped in behind him. The lead trooper paused only to attach a large data screen to a nearby wall. Then

he, too, slipped into the vehicle. Its sirens wailing, the Imperial hovercar slid quickly away.

"What was that all about?" Tash asked of her new companion. But Wedge had vanished.

Tash and Deevee walked over and joined the crowd that had gathered around the data screen. The flat electronic device displayed the words "WANTED FOR PIRACY." Underneath those words were four images. One was of the Rodian that had just been captured. A digital red X had been drawn through his image. But the other three images were of suspects still at large. Tash recognized the furred face of a Bothan, and two humans.

One of the humans was Wedge Antilles.

"Oh, dear," Deevee said with a start.

"I don't believe it," Tash said. "Why would a space pirate save us from that blob?"

"He did say he had been trapped here by the blockade," Deevee pointed out.

Tash still didn't believe it. Maybe it was his mention of the Jedi, but she had a feeling that Wedge had a good heart, and she had learned to trust her feelings.

"What do you think he meant about the Infirmary?"

The droid shook his metallic head. "I can't imagine. After all, it is the finest facility of its kind, and it is run by a friend of Master Hoole's."

That did not make Tash feel any better. She already had suspicions about Uncle Hoole. "I think we should go check on Zak. Right now."

Tash didn't wait for Deevee to respond. She sprang to action and hurried back to the suspended bridge. On the way, she tried to make sense of everything that had happened. First the mysterious Wedge Antilles appeared out of nowhere to save them from a weird blob creature, and then told them that no one but Imperials had been allowed on Gobindi in weeks. And yet, Tash reminded herself, Uncle Hoole made only one comm transmission and got clearance for them to land. And the

Imperial in charge of the Infirmary was an old friend of Uncle Hoole's.

A thought sent icy chills down Tash's spine. Did Uncle Hoole have connections with the Empire?

She and Zak had been traveling with Hoole for six months, but their Shi'ido uncle had never clearly explained what he did. All they knew was that Hoole was an anthropologist and that he visited different planets to study alien cultures. As Zak had once pointed out, they didn't even know Uncle Hoole's first name!

For all she knew, her uncle could be an Imperial agent.

If that's the case, Tash thought*, then he's no uncle of mine.*

Tash reached the Infirmary slightly out of breath. The hot Gobindi climate made even the slightest exertion difficult, and her sore arm had become stiff. She touched her bruise.

Something was wrong.

She rolled up her sleeve. The bruise had become a brown lump, and the skin there was dry and rough. Whatever Kavafi had given her had caused some sort of reaction.

Just as one of the turbolift doors opened, Deevee caught up to her, his gyros straining from the effort.

"Tash Arranda!" he scolded as they rode up the lift together. "How do you expect me to function as your caretaker if you continually run off like that!"

"Sorry, Deevee, but we need to make sure Zak is all right."

"I'm quite sure Zak is in good hands," the droid replied. "Dr. Kavafi is an expert in his field, and after all, Master Hoole would only bring Zak to a first-rate medical facility."

The turbolift door opened, and Tash found herself staring into the face of Dr. Kavafi. His face broke into a warm smile. "Tash, you're back from your walk so soon?"

"Urn, yes. I want to see my brother," she said, slipping past him and starting down the hall.

"Wait!" Kavafi said, catching up to her. "I'm afraid you won't be able to——"

"I want to see him anyway," Tash interrupted. She had been raised to respect adults, but her concern for her brother overwhelmed her. Besides, it was hard for her to respect someone in an Imperial uniform, even if he was a doctor. She continued her march down the hall.

"Wait!" Kavafi called after her.

Tash reached the door to Zak's medichamber with Kavafi running to catch up with her. "If you will only listen to——"

Tash activated the automatic door and stepped into the room.

The bed was empty. Zak was gone.

Chapter Eight

"Where's my brother?" Tash demanded.

Kavafi held out his hands to try to calm Tash. "Now, young lady, I tried to tell you that——"

"What have you done with him?"

"What is going on here?" Uncle Hoole appeared in the doorway.

"They've done something to Zak," Tash said. "They've taken him somewhere. "

"Of course they have," Uncle Hoole replied. "I'm the one who authorized it."

"You know where he is?" Tash said.

"Of course I do."

"Can I see him?" she asked suspiciously.

Dr. Kavafi looked bewildered. "Of course you can see him. But he's at the other end of the hall. This way."

Tash reddened with embarrassment. She had imagined that Zak had been taken away to some chamber of horrors and subjected to bizarre experiments.

Instead Kavafi led her into a sterile white room brilliantly lit with glowpanels. In the center of the room was a large tank filled with greenish liquid. A medical technician in a crisp white uniform monitored the tank, making small adjustments. Inside

the tank, Zak floated peacefully. He was hooked up to an air mask that allowed him to breathe while floating in the fluid, but otherwise, he looked very relaxed and alert. He even waved to Tash.

"A bacta tank," Deevee said. "He should heal quickly there."

Tash was surprised. Bacta was the galactic cure-all. It helped to heal wounds, stop infections, and regenerate damaged tissue. If Kavafi was treating Zak with bacta, he really was trying to cure him.

The medical technician finished adjusting the flow of bacta into the tank and then left the room with a polite nod.

Kavafi said, "It seemed the quickest way to treat his infection. I think this should kill the virus. I expect him to make a full recovery from the *Influenza necrosis?*"

Relief flooded through Tash. All she could do was repeat what she heard. "Full recovery? Influenza necrosi?"

Kavafi looked at his datapad. "That's right. We diagnosed it almost immediately and gave him the appropriate medicine. It is a fairly common illness and no danger as long as it is treated," he concluded. "Once he is out of the tank, the only aftereffect may be a slight skin rash from the virus that should go away in a few days."

"Now, Tash, I think you owe Dr. Kavafi an explanation and apology for your behavior," Hoole said firmly.

Tash felt her cheeks flush again. Kavafi smiled, but she could hardly meet his eyes. "I'm sorry, doctor. It's just that I heard someone"——without knowing why, she didn't want to mention Wedge by name——"I heard some people talking in the plaza. They sort of suggested that... that some strange things were going on in the Infirmary."

Kavafi sighed. He looked around and said quietly, "Tash, I hope you are not too young to understand this, but working for the Empire is not always rewarding." Tash's ears perked up. She was definitely not too young to understand *this*.

Kavafi continued. "There are people who oppose the Emperor and the government. They start rumors, they spread lies. But I joined the Imperial medical staff because the Empire has the money and resources that let me treat patients in the way they deserve. Now, I don't know whether or not some of the other things you may have heard about the Empire are true, but I can promise you that I run the Infirmary as a top-notch research and medical facility. Our job here is to cure patients, and that is what we do."

After only a moment's hesitation, Tash replied, "I understand. I'm sorry to have caused a scene."

The doctor winked. "Quite all right. Nice to see someone who cares so much about her family."

Hoole said, "Now that that is settled, Deevee and I need to return to the *Shroud*. Tash, will you stay with Zak until he is released from the bacta tank? "

"Sure," she replied.

Hoole started to leave, then turned back and said quietly, "And please do not make any trouble."

Tash watched Hoole depart. She felt a sudden pain stab up through her arm. She could feel the lump there start to swell.

"Dr. Kavafi?" she asked. "Will you have a look at this?"

She rolled up her sleeve. The brown lump had grown uglier and larger. It was already a few centimeters wide, and thin brown veins ran down its sides and into her skin.

"Hmmm." Dr. Kavafi picked up an electroscope and examined the bruise. "It looks as though you've had a reaction to the injection I gave you. But it is nothing serious. How do you feel?"

"All right," she said. "A little tired and hot."

The doctor chuckled. "Gobindi will do that to you. I wouldn't worry about that bump. It should go away soon enough."

Tash watched the doctor as he put away the visor. The warnings she had received still echoed in her head, and she

wondered if she could trust him. Maybe he had injected her with something. He could have given her some sort of drug....

Tash stopped herself. He had given Hoole the same injection. He and Hoole were friends, and Hoole was fine.

"I have to go check on several other patients." Kavafi pointed to a computer terminal built into the medichamber wall. "Tash, while you are waiting, why don't you look at a rundown of our research program? You can see a complete presentation of the Infirmary's goals."

Tash shrugged. "Okay."

At the computer terminal, Kavafi punched in a code and the computer displayed a description of the Infirmary. Above the display, the initials "IBWD" appeared. Below the initials were the words "WELCOME TO THE IMPERIAL BIOLOGICAL WELFARE DIVISION."

"Enjoy yourself," he said as he left the bacta chamber.

As Kavafi left, Tash began to punch absentmindedly through the computerized tour. Most of the commentary was about the benefits of Imperial research and the wise Imperial scientists who were devoted to improving life for all species.

"Yeah, right," Tash muttered. "Except on Alderaan," she said, thinking of the Empire's destruction of her homeworld.

Disgusted, she slapped the controls to wipe the lies off the screen. A moment later the computer exited the tour program and returned to the main menu. The screen went dark except for the command "ENTER PASSWORD" followed by ten blank squares. Tash was about to call for Kavafi's help, then decided not to.

Uncle Hoole had told her she was looking for conspiracies where they didn't exist. He was probably right. But she had nothing to lose by typing the word that came into her head.

Tash looked around. No one was watching her.

She typed in the letters "S-T-A-R-S-C-R-E-A-M."

The screen remained blank. Tash was just about to cancel the entry and start again when an image popped into the center of

the screen. Tash's heart skipped a beatm until she recognized the same image she'd seen before. She was looking at the familiar display of the Infirmary with the letters "IBWD" appearing at the top.

But when Tash looked more closely, her throat tightened. Underneath those large letters, the text no longer read, IMPERIAL BIOLOGICAL WELFARE DIVISION.

Now it read, IMPERIAL BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS DIVISION.

Chapter Nine

Tash read the words over and over. Biological weapons.

Biological weapons.

She shuddered. The lump on her arm throbbed and stretched. Tash almost thought she saw it quiver under her sleeve.

The medical technician came into the room, and Tash quickly hit the computer's Escape button, wiping the image clear.

She walked back to the bacta tank in which Zak was being treated. He smiled at her again; then he put two hands together and laid his head on them as though napping.

*This is a bore,*he was saying.

Tash had no way to mime her own message. She looked to make sure the medical technician was not watching, and mouthed the words, Zak, *we're caught inside a biological weapons plant!*

Inside the bacta tank Zak raised his eyebrows and shook his head. He didn't understand. Tash mouthed the words slowly.

Bi-o-lo-gi-cal weapons!

Again Zak did not understand. Tash decided to try a different, simpler word.

Tash pointed to a picture on the wall. It was a plain piece of artwork, a painting someone had done of a starfield. She put a finger on the painting itself and pointed to one star in the starfield. Zak nodded vigorously that he understood. A star.

Tash walked back to the tank, put her hands on her head, and opened her mouth wide as if she were yelling.

Star. Scream.

Starscream.

Zak nodded again. He understood.

Tash spread her hands wide, trying to cover the entire room, the entire Infirmary.

Over the air mask, Zak's eyes grew as wide as saucers. The Infirmary was connected to Project Starscream.

***

Tash knew Zak understood. She motioned to Zak to remain calm. She would be back as soon as she could.

Tash hurried to the turbolifts, passing Dr. Kavafi in the hall. "Tash, where are you going?"

"I'll be back!" she said. "I need something from the ship!"

"Lobby," she said as soon as she had stepped into the lift. As she rode down, Tash suddenly felt so dizzy she had to lean against a wall for support.

They had gotten the name *Project Starscream* from the *Shroud*'s computer files. ForceFlow had suggested that Starscream and the planet Gobindi were connected. And now she knew for sure the code name *Starscream* was a password into secret files inside the Infirmary.

And the Infirmary was run by Hoole's friend.

Tash needed to talk to ForceFlow now more than ever. Exiting the Infirmary, Tash walked passed the storm-troopers and out onto the top of the ziggurat. How to get back to the ship?

"Excuse me," she said to one of the troopers. She tried not to sound nervous. The trooper had no reason to think that she was anything other than a thirteen-year-old girl who needed help.

"Yeah?" the trooper asked. His voice sounded flat and filtered through his mask.

"Are there any shuttles back to the landing dock? I need to get back to my uncle's ship."

The trooper checked his chronometer. "No shuttles for another twenty minutes."

Tash didn't want to wait that long.

Since the ziggurat on which she stood was the highest in the city, Tash could see the landing docks in the distance. Four bridges separated her from the ship.

She hurried for the first bridge. As soon as she was out of the stormtroopers' sight, she started to run.

Tash wasn't as athletic as her younger brother, but she was in good shape, so it surprised her when, after she'd passed through a second ziggurat and crossed a second bridge, her chest started to heave and her clothes to dampen with sweat. She stopped and leaned against a guardrail.

*Must be the heat,*she thought.

The sweat had also begun to make her itch. Her left arm felt a little numb.

Tash slowed her pace and continued to the landing dock. She noticed that the platform was crowded with starships. Tash guessed that they had been grounded by the blockade.

Reaching the *Shroud*, Tash punched in the access code and slipped inside the hatchway.

"Hello!" she called out, expecting both Hoole and Deevee to be there. But she only found Deevee working at his computer on the codes for Evazan's files.

"Hello, Tash," the droid said. "I did not expect you to return to the ship so soon." He was focused on the computer screen.

"Any luck breaking the code?" she asked.

Deevee's voice was clipped. "No. As I said before, much as I hate to admit it, this code is far too complex for my programming."

"Then why do you keep trying?" she asked.

The droid shrugged. "If I had a cipher droid, I would make use of its talents. If I had a protocol droid, I would request its

assistance. But I do not. I only have my own programming, so I use it to the best of my abilities."

Deevee stopped, pressed a button, and the screen went blank. "I believe I am done for now. I must go and see how Zak is doing."

"I'll come back as soon as I can," Tash said.

"No, Tash," Deevee said. "Master Hoole's instructions were that should you come back to the ship, you should wait here until we return."

"Right," she replied as Deevee slipped out the door.

Tash passed through the main lounge and entered her cabin. Dropping into the chair at her computer, she powered on and tried to catch a link to the HoloNet. She wanted to talk to ForceFlow. Whoever he was, he obviously knew something about Gobindi.

HOLONET ACCESS DENIED.

The signal appeared on her computer screen. She typed in, RETRY.

HOLONET ACCESS DENIED.

Tash typed in a command, searching for the cause.

ALL OFFWORLD TRANSMISSIONS PROHIBITED BY ORDER OF THE IMPERIAL GOVERNMENT. DUE TO INCREASED PIRATE ACTIVITIES IN THE SECTOR, THE IMPERIAL STAR FLEET HAS ORDERED ALL INTERPLANETARY TRANSMISSIONS IN THIS SECTOR STOPPED WHILE THEY SEARCH FOR ILLEGAL SIGNALS.

What's going on? No interplanetary travel. No communications. The Empire has completely cut Gobindi off from the rest of the galaxy, and no one seems to notice.

She typed in more commands, trying to find a way around the jamming. She was so focused on her efforts, that she didn't hear the hatchway open a second time.

She didn't hear her own door open.

And she never saw the figure that crept up behind her until it was too late.

Chapter Ten

A shadow fell across her computer screen, and Tash started. She turned around and found Wedge standing in her room. Behind him stood two other figures: One was a human with a scar running from the corner of his left eye, across the bridge of his nose, and down to the right side of his jaw. The other was a Bothan, a humanoid with blue fur that ruffled nervously.

They were the pirates Tash had seen on the data screen. She backed against the wall of her room. She was trapped.

"Tash, don't be afraid," Wedge said calmly. "We're not here to hurt you."

"What do you want? Stay away from me," she said thickly. Her heart had begun to beat rapidly.

"We're not going to hurt you," Wedge repeated. "In fact, we need your help."

"You're pirates!" she snapped.

Wedge shook his head. "We're not pirates. We're Rebels." Wedge pointed to his two companions. "We were spying on Imperial activities here in Mah Dala when the Empire clamped down and blockaded the system. Now we're stuck."

"Why are you telling me this?" she asked.

"I know I'm taking a risk," Wedge said, "but we're running out of options. The Empire knows we're here. They've already

captured one of our group." Tash remembered the Rodian. "It's only a matter of time before they find us, unless we get offplanet. Your ship is the only one that's landed or departed from Gobindi in weeks. We need it."

"You're going to steal the ship!" she said. "You *are* pirates!"

"If we had wanted to steal it, we would have done that already," Wedge replied. "We just need a ride offplanet. You'll be doing the galaxy a favor—— unless, that is, I'm wrong, and you really are part of the Empire."

"Well, I'm not!" Tash snapped. She was no longer nervous, but she still felt strangely warm, and her breath was short. "I hate the Empire. They killed my parents. They were on Alderaan when it was destroyed by the Death Star."

Wedge frowned. "You're from Alderaan?"

"Yes, and I'll bet I have more reason than you to hate the Empire."

Again the venom in her words surprised her. But she *did* hate the Empire. She had every reason to hate it. She felt hot tears form in her eyes. She didn't mean to speak these words——she was hardly aware that she had thought them——but they came out of her mouth. "I want revenge on them for what they did to my parents."

"I'm glad you're on *our* side," the other human joked.

But Wedge's eyes grew soft. "I'm glad we agree that the Empire's bad, Tash. But didn't you say you admired the Jedi Knights?"

She nodded.

Wedge considered. "My people, the people I work with, we believe in the Jedi, too. I've read a lot about them."

"Me too!" Tash exclaimed.

Wedge continued. "Let me tell you one of the things I learned about the Jedi. It has to do with that word *revenge*. Don't use it. Don't even think it." He looked hard at Tash. "The Jedi fought in many wars, but do you know what truly made them great?"

"What?" she asked breathlessly.

"They were warriors, but they weren't violent. They never forgot that their enemies were living beings, just like they were, with their own beliefs in right and wrong. They didn't get angry. They didn't hate their opponents. The Jedi always kept their minds on what they were fighting for, rather than what they were fighting against."

Tash listened to the words. They sounded like good advice. But they didn't sink in. Not hate the Empire? Not hate the people who had destroyed her family and her entire planet?

"I-I'm not sure I can do that," she admitted. If anything, she realized, her anger was growing by the minute. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest. The blood throbbed in her veins. Her bruised left arm ached.

Wedge shrugged. "I'm not sure I can either." He grinned. "But then, I'm just a starpilot. I'm happiest behind the controls of a snub fighter, not trying to use the Force."

Wedge paused again. "Tash, we have information we need to get offplanet. All transmissions are blocked. No ships can fly. Except this one. This ship's registry has unlimited landing clearance for this dock. We can fly out of here and no one will question us."

Tash recalled how easily the *Shroud* had docked on Gobindi, once they'd activated their telesponder code. *How did Hoole manage to do it?* she wondered. *Is he an Imperial after all?*

She never got the chance to answer. Behind Wedge, the other human cried out.

Something had grabbed him.

Chapter Eleven

Wedge and the Bothan jumped out of the way as the scar-faced human went down. Thick streams of slime had wrapped themselves around his legs.

A blob had crept aboard the ship.

The man cursed and tried to get up. He pounded a gloved fist into the blob. His hand sank partway into its gooey flesh, doing no damage. As he pulled it out, the glove stuck in the slime.

Recovering from shock, Wedge and the Bothan leaped into action. They, too, wore gloves. They used their hands to pry the blob loose from their comrade's legs.

Wedge and the Bothan pulled the blob away. It was heavy, but they managed to carry it to the hatchway and toss it outside.

"Are you all right?" Tash asked the scarred man.

"Fine, I think," he replied as his friends returned. He wiped his hand on his pant leg.

"I can't believe no one has tried to destroy those things," Tash said.

"The Empire won't destroy them," Wedge said quickly. "We think the Empire is *creating* them."

"What?"

The Bothan helped the scarred man to his feet. "The blobs appeared at the same time the blockade began. We think there's some connection."

"That Infirmary is more than just a hospital," Wedge explained. "We think it may be the home of the——"

"Imperial Biological Weapons Division," Tash finished for him.

All three Rebels looked as if someone had just stunned them with a hold-out blaster. Wedge looked at Tash. "Who told you that?"

"No one," Tash replied. "I found out for myself."

Getting over his surprise, Wedge continued. "What we can't figure out is *why* the Empire is creating them. The blobs are hard to kill, but they move slowly and they're no great threat. If the Empire is creating biological weapons, I'm not sure what danger these things pose."

Suddenly, without warning, the scarred Rebel collapsed. The blood drained from his face, and he lost consciousness.

They checked his hands and arms for injuries but found none. The blob hadn't bitten or wounded him in any way.

The two Rebels were confused, but to Tash, the man's appearance looked familiar.

"He looks sick," she said, then told Wedge and the Bothan about the virus Zak had.

Wedge's face grew pale. "That's it! That's what these blobs are for. These creatures must be carriers." He looked at his Bothan partner. "The Empire is creating a plague, and these creatures are delivering it."

"Do you think we've contracted it?" the Bothan asked.

"No," Wedge replied. "It must be passed by touch, or we'd all have fallen sick by now."

"Why would they be releasing it here, in the city?" Tash wondered aloud. Carefully she touched the lump under her sleeve. Could she have the virus?

But no, she hadn't touched one of the blob creatures. She hadn't been infected with anything.

"Test cases," Wedge said. "They're using the city to see how effective the blobs are, I'd guess. We're all lab rats." He nodded to his Bothan companion. "Come on, we've got to get back to the safe house."

Careful not to let their bare skin touch him, the two Rebels pulled their friend up and supported him with their arms.

Wedge looked back at Tash. "Please help us, Tash. We'll be watching. When your ship is ready to leave, we'll know."

Wedge and the Bothan carried their comrade out of the ship, first checking for danger. But the blob was gone.

A small hovercar was parked nearby. They slipped inside and skimmed quickly away.

The *Shroud* suddenly felt very empty. Hoole and Deevee were gone, and Zak was...

Tash almost dropped to the floor in panic when she realized.

Zak was still in the hands of the Imperial Biological Weapons Division.

Chapter Twelve

Tash slowly returned to the Infirmary. She wanted to hurry, but her legs would barely move, and she was sweating. Her discomfort only made her angrier. And she found that the angrier she got, the more energy she had. She could feel her heartbeat all the way down to her fingertips. The brown lump on her forearm thudded against her skin.

Staring at the Imperial Infirmary tower, Tash wished once more that she were a Jedi. She wanted to ignite her lightsaber and storm the Infirmary. She wanted to save Zak. But she also wanted revenge on the people who had hurt him.

"Well, why not?" she said out loud. Her voice, if she had stopped to listen to it, hardly sounded like her own. "After what the Empire's done to me, they deserve it!"

But Tash had never even held a blaster, let alone a lightsaber. As much as she wanted to fight her enemies, she would have to use stealth instead.

She rode the lift up to the tenth floor, where Zak was being treated. She hurried to the bacta tanks.

But the bacta tanks were empty. Tash thought quickly.

Deevee said he was going to check on Zak. So where are they?

Tash saw the same medical technician who'd been attending Zak's bacta tank earlier. He was busily examining the bluish, liquid contents of a glass beaker.

"Excuse me," Tash said.

The technician glared at her, obviously unhappy to be interrupted. "What? "

"Do you know what happened to the boy who was being treated here?"

The technician looked at the bacta tank. "No, I don't." He turned back to his work.

"Was he scheduled to be released so soon?" she asked.

With undisguised disgust, the technician put down his beaker and called up information on his datapad. "No," he said tersely, reading Zak's chart. "He was supposed to receive treatment for another hour."

"Well, where could he have gone?" she asked irritably. She didn't like the way this technician was treating her.

The technician turned back to his examination. "I don't know. I suggest you wait for him in the waiting room near the turbolifts."

Tash stared at the technician's back for a moment, but he did not turn around again. She could feel the blood pounding in her head. She felt angry. *Too* angry, she thought. Suddenly everything was aggravating her.

Tash tried to calm down and think clearly. Deevee had come to see Zak, and now Zak was gone. But Deevee followed Uncle Hoole's instructions. Had Hoole ordered the droid to do something with Zak? Or——Tash shuddered——do something to him?

Tash looked at the computer terminal she had used before. Everything she needed to know was locked inside it. And Tash had the key: the name *Starscream*.

But before she could reach the terminal, the medical technician appeared behind her. "I thought I told you to go to

the waiting room. This is an Imperial facility. We don't allow people to simply wander around."

Tash thought up a quick lie. "Um, I know. But I was supposed to meet with Dr. Kavafi, too. I thought he was at the bacta tanks." She could only hope that the technician recognized her from before.

The technician said, "There are tanks at the other end of the hall as well. You might try there."

"Thanks," Tash said, hurrying on.

She wiped a drop of perspiration from her forehead. Had something happened to the climate controls? The building seemed especially hot. Her eyes clouded over for a moment, and the hallway seemed to tilt dizzily. Tash panicked. Had she caught Zak's illness?

But the feeling quickly passed, and Tash hurried on.

She would worry about herself as soon as she had found Zak and discovered what her uncle was plotting.

At the other end of the hall Tash found the other set of bacta tanks, and to her relief, an unoccupied computer terminal. Someone had obviously just finished working at this station—— it was cluttered with datadisks, an electroscope, and the leftovers of someone's lunch. Tash pushed them out of the way and was about to start typing.

"Still looking for Dr. Kavafi?" asked an accusing voice.

Tash whirled around. The technician had followed her. She was caught.

Chapter Thirteen

At that moment, Zak and Deevee were making their way toward the landing bay.

"I still don't understand," Zak said to his droid companion. "I didn't mind getting out of the bacta tank early. Believe me, it was getting pretty boring in there. But why did we have to leave the Infirmary so soon? Why couldn't we wait for Tash?"

"I'm afraid I don't know," the droid responded. "I am simply following Master Hoole's orders, and those orders are to get you back to the *Shroud* as soon as possible. Tash should be waiting for us there."

But when they reached the landing bay, they found the ship empty. "I can't understand it," Deevee said. "I told her to wait."

"Yeah," Zak replied, poking his head into Tash's room. "It's not like her to —— Yech!"

Zak felt his boot sink into something soft and squishy on the floor. Lifting his foot, he saw long, sticky strings of ooze stretch between the bottom of his boot and a thin streak of slime on the deck of the *Shroud*. "What is this stuff?"

Deevee recognized it instantly. "It appears to be the same material that those blobs were composed of. Tash and I encountered one when we first arrived." The droid quickly

described for Zak the blob's attack and explained how he and Tash were rescued by the mysterious man named Wedge.

Zak's eyes lit up in alarm. "One of those things might have gotten Tash!"

"Zak——" the droid started to say. But Zak had already jumped out the hatchway and was searching the ground for more signs of the blob.

By the time the droid had caught up to him, Zak had reached the edge of the ziggurat that the landing bay was on.

"That thing left a slime trail," Zak said. "After it left the ship I think it crawled down the side of the ziggurat." He pointed down the steep slope of the pyramid, which vanished into the jungle steam far below.

"Unfortunately the side of this ziggurat is far too smooth for either of us to negotiate," Deevee commented. "I suggest we wait for Master Hoole to——"

"There's no time!" Zak insisted. "And there are stairs right over here. I think they go all the way to the bottom." Zak hurried for the stairs on the side of the ziggurat, without waiting.

"Tending human children," Deevee muttered to himself. "I would rather herd a shipload of Gamorrean slime cats."

He descended in pursuit of Zak.

He did not see the two shapes that came out from the shadow of a nearby ship and follow them down the stairs.

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Tash found herself growing uncomfortable under the Infirmary technician's suspicious glare.

"I thought you said you were looking for Dr. Kavafi," the technician growled after a moment of silence.

Tash thought quickly. "I thought he'd be here," she said. "I was supposed to bring him this electroscope," she added, picking up the electronic visor.

The story sounded lame. She felt a drop of moisture trickle down her back.

The technician studied her a moment longer, and then said slowly, "Let's see if I can locate the doctor for you."

He put one hand on Tash's arm and used the other to call up some information on the computer terminal. "There you go," he said. "Dr. Kavafi is in a meeting on the twentieth floor. You can wait for him up there."

"Great," Tash said. "Thanks."

But this time the technician did not leave her. He escorted her back to the turbolifts and waited until one of the cars arrived. When it did, he watched Tash step aboard; then he leaned in and said, "Droid, take this young lady straight to the twentieth floor."

The door closed on his irritating smirk.

"Laser burn," Tash muttered as the turbolift shot up to the twentieth floor.

Maybe she could find a computer terminal there.

Still holding the electroscope, Tash stepped out onto the top floor of the Infirmary. The corridor was empty and quiet, lit by a few glowpanels and the light from a bank of viewports that looked out over the steamy floor of the planet. The hallway was lined with doors on either side, and the corridor curved away from her to the right and to the left, with no signs indicating where a computer terminal might be located. Tash guessed that this floor must be reserved for administrative offices. She had just decided to go left, when she heard a familiar voice approaching from that direction.

"I can't thank you enough for letting me in on your secret, Kavafi," she heard Uncle Hoole say. Tash had never heard her uncle sound so friendly or relaxed. "I'm sure it is a worthwhile endeavor."

"Think nothing of it, Hoole," Kavafi replied from around the corner. "There is no one I'd rather show my work to than you."

Tash scurried down the hallway to the right until she was out of sight. She listened as Hoole and Kavafi reached the lifts.

"How do we get there?" Hoole was asking.

"Right this way," Kavafi said.

She heard them step onto the turbolift. Just before the doors closed, she heard Kavafi say, "Bottom floor."

Quick as lightspeed Tash dashed for the turbolifts. Reading the indicator lights, she saw which lift Kavafi and Hoole had taken. It was moving fast.

Tash jumped inside another turbolift.

"Bottom floor," she said.

A mechanical voice issued from a small speaker. "Access limited. Password required."

"What?" Tash couldn't believe it. *Access limited?*

"Incorrect. Correct password required," said the voice.

Tash thought quickly. *There must be a floor beneath the lobby——a secret floor. One that requires a password to enter.* "Password required," the mechanical voice repeated.

Tash braced herself. "Starscream."

The turbolift began to descend.

The lift moved at top speed, but the ride was very long. Tash felt the small chamber grow hotter, as if she was heading down toward the source of Gobindi's humid climate.

Finally the turbolift stopped. The doors opened, and Tash peered out. There was a long hallway outside, but it looked nothing like the Infirmary. The walls and floor were made of massive stones packed tightly together. Moss grew in thick patches on the walls. The air was heavy and so moist that puddles had formed on the floor.

She was inside the ziggurat.

Cautiously she crept forward. There didn't seem to be any guards or sentries.

Tash's heart was pounding. The hallway was dim, lit only by small glowpanels placed far apart. She wondered how far she was inside the ziggurat. She guessed that she must be close to the bottom.

Tash heard a soft, squishing sound echo faintly behind her. She quickly glanced over her shoulder.

No one was there.

She took a few more steps, and heard the *squish* again. She looked back. The hallway was still empty. Then, Tash looked up.

Over her head hung several oozing blobs, ready to drop.

Chapter Fourteen

Tash turned to run back to the turbolift, but one of the blobs released its grip on the ceiling and dropped. She jumped away, and the blob splattered to the floor. It shuffled toward her, and Tash backed up a few steps down the hallway.

Tash knew she had to get to the lifts. She should never have come down here alone.

*Maybe I can jump over it,*she thought.

She never got the chance. A small *slurp* above her gave Tash just enough warning, and she scrambled out of the way as another blob dropped from the ceiling. And then another, and another. In moments the hallway floor was covered with blobs. Tash stifled a scream and ran down the hallway as the blobs oozed toward her.

She had no choice now. She turned and ran, knowing that the blobs were too slow to catch her. After a few moments the creatures lost interest in her and began to wriggle their way back up the walls.

But they'd be waiting for her if she tried to go back to the lifts. She would have to face whatever else awaited inside the ziggurat.

The hallway did not branch off, so Tash knew Hoole and Kavafi must have come this way. She crept along, trying to keep

to the shadows and watching the ceiling for any more of the slimeballs.

Tash's clothes were soaked with sweat. They stuck to her arms and legs like wet bandages. Her arm had begun to throb more violently. Peeling back her wet sleeve, Tash looked down at the lump that had grown on her arm. It was darker now, a dirty brown color that seemed to be spilling onto the rest of her arm.

It seemed like hours, but finally Tash saw a brighter light up ahead. The corridor became a wide plaza with many channels branching in different directions. Although the plaza was empty, Tash could hear muffled voices and the sound of machinery coming from the hallways.

Tash didn't feel safe, out in the open under the bright glowpanels of the plaza. The place could be crawling with stormtroopers, and she wasn't supposed to be there. But she had nowhere else to go. All she wanted to do now was get out of the ziggurat alive.

Keeping to the walls, Tash reached the nearest hallway and slipped quietly inside. Like the tunnel from the turbolift, it was dark, and she felt less exposed in the shadows.

Now if only the hallway led to an exit.

Up ahead, Tash could see that the stone walls of the tunnel had been replaced by a series of transparent plexiform panels. As she approached, Tash peeked cautiously around the edge of the nearest panel. Through it she could see a small bare room with white walls, floor, and ceiling. There was no furniture in the room, and no access panels for comlinks or vidcams. It looked like a cell. In the center of it lay one of the blobs. Checking to make sure no one was nearby, Tash stepped in front of the plexiform panel.

The blob sprang at her. It thudded against the transparent barrier and slowly slid down it toward the floor. It was huge.

The blob launched itself at Tash again.

Tash continued down the hall. She passed six or seven more of the transparent panels, each one looking into an identical room containing a blob.

Although the cells never changed, Tash noticed that the blobs *did*. They were growing smaller. It was as if the first cell contained a fully developed blob, while farther down the line they were still forming.

The largest blobs were the most violent, crashing against the plexiform that separated them from Tash. The smaller ones simply sat on the floor of the cells, quivering.

Passing even more. rooms, Tash saw a blob that was just about the size and shape of a human man, lying on the floor. Tash could almost imagine a person underneath the ooze. The sight made her shudder.

The next sight made her scream.

The last room did not contain a blob. In it she saw a green-skinned Rodian——the same Rodian who had been arrested the other day. He was lying on the floor, panting for breath. A thick layer of slime covered his chest and his back. Strands of ooze crept down his legs and up his arms.

Tash felt her stomach turn in disgust. She saw the Rodian's mouth move. The plexiform was soundproof so she couldn't hear what he said, but she guessed by the snarl on his lips that he was swearing. He struggled violently against the ooze, trying to shake it off. Instead, the amount of ooze suddenly increased, almost burying him.

Tash's eyes went wide with fear. She had seen that kind of instant replication once before, when she had looked through the electroscope in the medichamber.

She knew she was looking at a virus.

The Rodian let out a scream and made one last effort to shake the disgusting mess off his body. But his struggle only made things worse. The virus replicated itself again, and the Rodian simply disappeared.

Tash tried to swallow, but her mouth was as dry as sand. The blobs were people. People who had been infected with a virus.

Chapter Fifteen

As Tash made this frightening discovery, Zak and Deevee continued to climb down the side of the ziggurat on which the landing bay sat. The stairs that had been carved into the giant pyramid reached from its highest level to its lowest depth. After 231 steps, they had sunk down into a gray-green haze of steam that rose up from the hot jungle floor. After 463 steps, Deevee stopped counting.

The steps were damp and covered with slime. The people of Mah Dala did not go down to the jungle, and no one had walked on the stairs for years. Moss, growing quickly in the humid air, covered most of the great stones that made up the structure.

At long last they reached the bottom. The jungle floor was soft and wet, and covered with a layer of rotting leaves and branches. Through the mist the trunks of enormous trees loomed like shadowy giants. The ground beneath them was covered with a layer of mud.

"I don't believe it," Zak said, pulling at his shirt collar. "It's even hotter down here."

"And far more unpredictable," Deevee added. "Dr. Kavafi said that the original Gobindi built the ziggurats so that they could avoid the jungle."

Zak looked up. The top of the ziggurat towered three hundred meters above them. "I can't believe the Gobindi just vanished," Zak commented. "You'd think a culture that could build that would be able to survive anything."

The droid wiped a thin layer of moisture from his photoreceptors. "Something obviously destroyed them. With our luck, we'll find that it was something in this jungle."

"That's why we should find Tash and leave as soon as possible," Zak replied.

Deevee pointed to the soft, squishy ground. The slime track that Zak had followed on the hard stones above was now lost in layers of rotting leaves. "And just how do you intend to find her, or the blobs?"

But Zak didn't look where Deevee had pointed. He was staring at a nearby tree. "I think they found us!"

The branches of the tree were alive with fat, wriggling shapes that had begun to slide down the branches. A dozen blobs had already reached the jungle floor and were oozing toward Zak and Deevee.

"Zak, I insist we turn back," Deevee commanded.

"No argument here," Zak replied. They both turned but found the stairs blocked. Blobs had crept up the sides of the ziggurat and covered the stairs. They were trapped.

"Go!" Zak shouted. "We can outrun them! We'll find another ziggurat and climb that one."

He and Deevee hurried from the spot just as the blobs closed in. Zak and Deevee were faster than the blobs, but the soggy jungle floor slowed them down.

Out of the corner of his eye, Zak could see more of the creatures dropping from the trees on either side of them.

"There's got to be another ziggurat around here somewhere!" Zak yelled, ducking beneath a low-hanging branch:

"There!" Deevee replied, pointing. His photoreceptors picked out a thick wall looming out of the haze. "It appears to be a large one."

Zak and Deevee reached the wall of the ziggurat ahead of the blobs. But they could hear the shrubs rustling, and the wet, smacking sound of the creatures wriggling along the tree branches and the ground.

"Judging from the design and size," Deevee noted, "I'd say we are at the base of the main ziggurat. The Infirmary must be somewhere above us."

"Great," Zak said. "So where are the stairs?" He could see nothing but a flat wall ten meters high.

"Perhaps around the other side," Deevee suggested.

They never got to find out. A horde of blobs oozed from the steamy shadows on every side. They were trapped.

Zak and Deevee turned to face the approaching line of slime. One of the blobs lunged forward.

But it stopped in midstretch and recoiled as a shrill sound filled the air. A bright streak of energy shot out of the gloom and struck the blob head on. The blob scurried backward in surprise.

Someone had fired a blaster bolt.

On the blob's skin, a small black hole smoked for a moment, then oozed over and disappeared. The blob shuffled forward once more.

More energy beams followed, a barrage of blaster bolts that cut a pathway through the line of slime creatures. Through the hole stepped a human and a Bothan——Wedge and his Rebel ally. In moments they had fought their way to the ziggurat.

"You!" Deevee blurted as he saw Wedge. "But you are an outlaw!"

Wedge managed a grin. "I guess that depends on which side you're on."

He fired again and again, sending blaster bolts streaking toward the blobs. The energy weapons did not kill the creatures, but seemed to slow them down.

"How did you know we were here?" Zak asked.

"We saw you go down the stairs," the Bothan replied, never taking his eyes off the blobs. "We knew you'd need help."

"Thanks!" Zak shouted over the scream of blaster fire.

"Don't thank us," Wedge said. "Just get us off this planet! You can start by finding a way up this ziggurat."

"But there aren't any stairs!" Zak said.

Wedge poured blaster fire onto a bold blob that had charged toward them. "These ziggurats must have served *some* purpose. Look for a door!"

Deevee turned back to the wall. It was damp and overgrown with moss and fungus. The droid adjusted his photoreceptors to their sharpest focus and scanned the wall. He could see that deep grooves had been carved into it. Most of the grooves were covered with lichen and moss.

"I found something," he announced. With Zak's help, the droid peeled away layers of thick growth until the outline of a hatchway appeared. It was designed to blend into the stone wall, but they could see the thin seams that would let the door slide open. Zak located a small control panel and pushed several buttons, with no response.

"It's locked," he groaned.

Deevee's sensors had been drawn to a series of grooves carved over the hatchway. They were set in regular rows and marked through with curved lines.

"What is it?" Zak asked.

"It is written in the Gobindi language. But it is an extremely curious message."

"What does it say?"

Deevee pointed at the squiggly lines. "It is a chemistry equation. It appears to be medical in nature. I think it is the antidote to some sort of infection."

"That's not going to help us at the moment!" Wedge snapped.

The blobs were creeping closer, ignoring the storm of energy Wedge and his companion shot at them.

"There's more here," Zak said. He peeled off more of the fungus that covered the wall.

Deevee's photoreceptors darkened. "Zak, if my interpreter program is working correctly, I'm afraid I know exactly what it says. And I know why this door is locked."

"Why?"

Deevee paused. "It is a warning not to disturb this building. It marks the spot where a deadly virus was sealed up for eternity."

Chapter Sixteen

Inside the ziggurat Tash turned away as the Rodian finished his transformation into a blob. She had seen the Imperial stormtroopers arrest the Rodian, claiming he was a pirate. They had probably infected him with the virus on purpose, and then locked him in this cell inside the ziggurat. And the virus had slowly taken over his entire body.

A second thought made Tash shiver from head to toe as she remembered Wedge's warning. Was this the fate that awaited Zak? Had Dr. Kavafi infected Zak with the virus?

And what was Uncle Hoole's involvement? How could he allow Zak to be harmed?

Unanswered questions swarmed about in Tash's head like buzzing grass flies. But they were overshadowed by a sudden, uncontrollable anger. Tash had never felt violent rage before, but she guessed that it must be something like this. *The Empire had killed her parents. And now they had infected her brother with a virus!* She was sure of it. She wanted to tear the Infirmary apart with her bare hands.

The lump on her arm throbbed as her muscles clenched. At the end of this hallway there was a door. Tash pressed her ear against it, listening for any sound. Hearing nothing, she pressed

the Open button. The hiss of the sliding door sounded loud in her ears, but there was no one in the room to hear it.

Tash stepped into a wide, round chamber. The room was covered in fungus from the floor all the way up to the ceiling high above. The stone floor beneath her feet was slippery with moisture, and the air reminded her of a sauna.

But worse than the heat was the fear that fell over Tash like a wall of durasteel. Something evil was in this room. Her skin crawled. She felt a million eyes staring at her.

Tash scanned the room, but saw nothing. Still, the feeling of being watched would not go away.

She considered going back... but to where? For all she knew, every other room in the ziggurat was crowded with Imperial scientists. No matter what she was feeling, she knew there were no Imperial soldiers in this room.

She stepped forward, and the door whispered shut behind her. Then, with a click, it locked tight. Tash threw herself at the door, but the durasteel portal was several centimeters thick, and there was no way she could force it open.

"This," boomed an ominous voice over a hidden loudspeaker, "is the final test of the Gobindi virus."

At the far end of the chamber another door slid open. Several stormtroopers shoved a human man into the chamber just before the door slid closed again. The man wore an Imperial medical uniform, but it was torn and caked with mud. His face looked drawn and thin, and his hair was dirty and matted against his head. Despite all this Tash recognized him instantly.

It was Dr. Kavafi.

"What... what happened to you?" Tash asked in bewilderment. Now Kavafi looked as if he'd been locked in a Hutt's dungeon for months.

"Wh-Who are you?" Kavafi asked in return.

Tash wrinkled her brow. "Tash Arranda. You know me. I'm Hoole's niece."

Kavafi pushed some strands of hair out of his eyes. "I knew a Shi'ido named Hoole years ago, but I've never met you before." He suddenly stiffened. "Never mind. It doesn't matter now. I'm afraid you have gotten yourself involved in something terrible." He looked around nervously.

"I know!" Tash said in sudden frustration. She was getting a headache, and her skin felt hot and itchy from the room's heat. "I thought *you* were behind the virus!"

"Not me!" the doctor said. He seemed more meek than before. "I came to this planet to do virus research. I did good work, too. But several weeks ago I was kidnapped right out of the Infirmary by someone who looked exactly like me. An imposter!"

An imposter? Tash shook her head. "No, it was you. My uncle Hoole brought us here so you could treat my brother Zak for a virus."

The man shook his head. "I'm telling you, for the last six weeks I have been locked in a cell at the bottom of this ziggurat. Someone assumed my identity and took over the Infirmary, replacing my entire staff with his own scientists!"

"Why?" Tash asked.

The man pointed to the walls around them. "I chose Gobindi for my virus research because the humid climate is ripe for breeding viruses. But as I began my research, I discovered that the Gobindi had done their own research before they vanished. They knew that the jungles below their city were festering with viruses, bacteria, and all manner of organisms. But the Gobindi's discoveries cost them their lives. They unearthed a virus on the planet's surface that was too deadly for words. Even the Gobindi, with all their knowledge, had no way to destroy it!"

"So that's how they disappeared," Tash whispered.

"They were wiped out!" Kavafi said. "In a last attempt to control the virus, the Gobindi identified all its original sources. Caves, stagnant lakes, and forest groves where the virus spread from plants to animals and back again, waiting for another host

to come along and help spread the disease. Since they could not kill the virus, the Gobindi built huge tombs that——they hoped——would seal it away forever."

"These ziggurats," Tash whispered. "They were built to stop the virus from spreading?"

The man nodded. "When I realized this, I sent all the information to my superiors in the Empire, recommending that Gobindi be quarantined forever. The next thing I knew, a Star Destroyer arrived. I was thrown into a dungeon. Someone took control of all my experiments. But instead of stopping the research, they began to dig into the ziggurats, looking for the virus itself!" He shuddered. "I think they are using my virus research to create a galaxy wide plague."

Tash looked at Kavafi's clothes, his ratty hair, and his bloodshot, swollen eyes. He certainly looked like he'd been in a dungeon for weeks. And his story was convincing. She asked, "But who would do something like that? Who could impersonate you so perfectly?"

Ten meters up the wall, a panel slid back to reveal an observation viewport. Someone was standing at the transparisteel window. "I could," the figure said.

It was Uncle Hoole.

Chapter Seventeen

Tash blinked.

No, it wasn't Uncle Hoole. The face was too round and the body too squat. Plus, the figure grinned evilly. Hoole rarely even smiled. No, this wasn't Hoole.

But he was a Shi'ido, a member of Hoole's species. Which meant that he could change shape at will.

"That's how he impersonated you," Tash realized. "That's who I thought was Dr. Kavafi."

"A convincing act, I thought," the mysterious Shi'ido said, speaking through a comm unit. "It had to be, to trick Hoole. I even went to the trouble of actually healing your brother in a bacta tank, just to keep Hoole at ease."

"Where is Zak?" Tash yelled.

The mysterious Shi'ido grinned again. "At this moment I'd say he is lying on the floor of his cell, covered in the virus. In another few minutes, he should be just another——what did you call it, Tash? —— a blob creature."

Tash's knees felt weak. All this time she had suspected Hoole of doing something wrong. He was being fooled, just like she was. She could have talked to him at any time. Instead she had kept her worries to herself, and now they had all fallen into some sort of deadly trap.

"Do not feel bad, young lady," the Shi'ido said mockingly. "You are dealing with an intellect far greater than yours."

"Why are you doing this to us?" Tash yelled.

The Shi'ido's face clouded in anger. "Because you deserve it. And far worse. Thanks to your meddling uncle, you and your brother have ruined two of my experiments so far."

"Your *experiments?*" Tash could hardly believe what she was hearing.

The Shi'ido continued. "I could have snuffed you out like an incense candle, but instead I watched and waited, giving you one last chance. And rather than give up your investigation, you headed straight here, to Gobindi."

"We came here because my brother was sick!" Tash argued. She was getting angry again, and the angrier she got, the hotter she felt. The skin around her bruised arm had started to itch. "We don't even know who you are! It's a coincidence."

"Coincidence?" the Shi'ido roared. "Was it coincidence that you showed up just in time to drive my living planet into a frenzy? Was it coincidence that you exposed Evazan just as he completed his resurrection serum? And was it coincidence that your very next stop was Gobindi, only three weeks after my virus experiments had begun?"

Tash opened her mouth to speak, then shut it. Who was this guy?

Dr. Kavafi spoke up and addressed the Shi'ido. "Whoever you are, you are playing with forces beyond your control. The virus inside this ziggurat was not meant to be disturbed. If it spreads, it could create a plague of galactic proportions!"

The Shi'ido yawned. "Actually, Dr. Kavafi, the virus you are so worried about was quite limited when I found it," he said through the comm unit. "Oh, it was deadly enough. It took over its host at an alarming rate. But it wasn't very contagious. You cannot catch it by breathing the same air someone infected has breathed. It cannot live very long outside a hot environment. It dies quickly unless it finds a host."

The Shi'ido shrugged. "I've done some tinkering with the virus's structure. My new version is far more effective because it *can* travel through the air. At least, I think it can. We are going to test it. Now."

In his observation booth the Shi'ido pulled a switch. Several vents in the walls and ceiling opened up, and Tash heard the whir of fans blowing air into the hot chamber.

The Shi'ido spoke again. "You have already seen the results of the virus. It doesn't kill its host. It invades the body of the victim and wraps it in a cocoon of slime, then continues to feed off it. I'm not sure how long the victims live."

Tash shook her head. She could not believe how evil this being was. "The people who disappeared. The people who've been arrested. You've been testing the virus on them! How could you?"

The Shi'ido laughed. "I'm going to do far worse than that. Once I'm sure the virus can infect people through the air, I'm going to test it on a much larger scale." He opened his arms wide. "I have turned this entire ziggurat into one enormous air vent, with the Infirmary as the cover. Once the Infirmary is gone, I plan to blow billions upon billions of virus particles over the city of Mah Dala."

"You can't!" Kavafi yelled.

"Why else do you think I have arranged to trap these people on the planet for so long? There are so many different species here. It is the perfect test to see which species are affected by the virus and which are not." The Shi'ido paused. "And that is the truly terrifying thing about a virus, don't you think?" he said. "You cannot see it. You cannot smell it, you cannot taste it. But it is there. It is there in the room with you right now."

Tash and Kavafi looked around. The room looked no different than it had a moment before. But they knew it was different. It had been filled with a deadly plague.

"Actually you should be honored, Dr. Kavafi," the Shi'ido said. "I've been saving you for this particular phase of my tests.

And the Arranda girl, well, she's been doomed since the moment she arrived on Gobindi."

The Shi'ido examined some instruments in the control booth. "Excellent. It appears my virus dispersal unit is functioning according to plan. If you two will excuse me, I have to make plans to infect a city."

He closed his eyes, and his skin began to wrinkle and bubble. The next instant, the Shi'ido had been replaced by the perfect image of Dr. Kavafi. The false doctor reached for a lever. "You will have to pardon the blast shield I'm about to close. I can't let any of the virus escape just yet, can I?"

The blast shield slammed shut across the transparisteel viewport, and the Shi'ido was gone.

"What should we do?" Tash asked.

Kavafi shook his head. "There is nothing to do. We are trapped. You cannot avoid what you cannot see."

Tash suddenly remembered the electroscope. She had carried it with her from the Infirmary. "I *can* see them."

She checked the visor's controls and reduced the magnification so that she could see both the virus particles and the room around her. She put the visor on.

Her heart froze.

The electroscope revealed clouds of tiny, wriggling red creatures all around her. Magnified a thousand times, they were still little more than specks in the air. Streams of them gushed from the air vents.

"Over there!" she yelled to Kavafi, pointing to one corner of the room as she ran to the other. Using the visor, she could see where the virus clouds were falling, and where the vents did not reach.

Kavafi ran where she pointed. But he was right under a virus cloud that slowly sank toward his head. "To your right! To your right!" she yelled.

He stepped to the right, and the virus wafted to the ground beside him.

Tash could see the tiny creatures, like eels with bulbous, jagged heads, swimming through the air, trying to get to her or Kavafi.

Tash turned in one direction, and then another, but the virus clouds had fallen like a curtain over her. She had nowhere to go.

"What is happening?" Kavafi yelled.

"I'm trapped," Tash said. It was true. The virus was all around her. Sooner or later, one of the particles would touch her skin, and she would be infected. She could only wait in terror as the invisible death settled over her.

Tash remembered the Rodian turning into a blob in his cell, and shivered uncontrollably.

"Is there any way to fight this virus? Isn't there a cure?" she yelled.

Kavafi replied wearily, "No. All I can tell you is that it depends on body temperature and chemistry."

Tash watched the virus come closer. The urge to run was almost unbearable, but there was nowhere to go.

Kavafi went on. "Your body has a certain temperature, and usually it creates certain kinds of chemicals in your blood, your brain, and all the different parts of your body. But when your body changes——as when you are angry, or sad, or when you are sick——your body temperature changes, and your brain sends signals to produce different chemicals. Somehow this virus affects those signals and feeds off of them. But I don't know how."

The blood-red virus clouds were billowing closer. The doctor was still surrounded by a safe pocket of clean air, but the area around Tash was filling up with the virus by the second.

A moment later the last of the uninfected air vanished. The virus clouds descended upon Tash. She could see 'her skin crawling with millions of virus particles, searching for ways into her body. She gagged.

"What is it?" Kavafi called.

"The virus," she said. "It's all over me!"

Tash stared at the millions upon millions of tiny red viruses landing lightly on her arms. She could not feel them. But with her enhanced vision she could see that her arms had become blood-red.

But a strange thing happened. None of the virus particles wriggled under her skin. The virus was on her, but it wasn't getting inside.

It wasn't infecting her!

She described what she saw to Kavafi. "It is possible," he said. "Some species may be immune. But I thought all humans were affected."

Tash shrugged. She knew what she saw. She wasn't getting infected! Filled with sudden hope, she looked around the locked chamber. The blast shield made the control room unreachable. The ceiling vents were too high. But some of the wall vents looked low enough.

Tash plunged through a red wall of virus.

"What are you doing?" Kavafi yelled.

"Going for help!" Tash replied. She stretched and grabbed hold of the vent. Because it had been built into the old rock of the ziggurat, it came away easily in her hand.

She looked back at Kavafi. He was still safe in a little pocket of uninfected air. "Don't move," she said. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Tash scrambled up the moss-covered stones and into the ventilator shaft.

It was like swimming through a sea of tiny sharks. The vents were still blowing the airborne virus, and wave after wave of the deadly creatures poured over her.

Not long after she'd begun her crawl, Tash heard a loud throbbing sound. She reached a point where the vent branched off in two directions. One branch was open, and virus clouds poured out of it.

The other branch was blocked by a small energy screen, probably, Tash thought, to keep the virus from spreading into

other areas of the ziggurat. The field was strong enough to hold back electroscopic creatures, but not nearly powerful enough to stop her. She pushed her way into the energy field, ignoring the tingling she felt as she passed through it.

On the far side of the screen, the vent narrowed, and Tash had to squeeze her way through the tight space. The throbbing noise grew louder.

Reaching the end of the shaft, Tash wriggled toward a durasteel grate. It popped off easily, and Tash dropped down into a new chamber.

She was in the pump room. Like the other chamber, this one was round. Most of the space was occupied by an enormous mechanism made of gleaming durasteel. A pipe, twice as wide as Tash was tall, rose up from the machine, straight up through the thick stones of the ziggurat. This must be what the Shi'ido planned to use to pump the virus into the Gobindi atmosphere.

Still wearing the visor, Tash looked at her arms. The virus had stopped wriggling and had begun to drop off her skin. Both Dr. Kavafi and the evil Shi'ido had said the virus could only live a short time unless it found a host, and these seemed to have died.

Taking off the visor, Tash walked around the pump, looking for an exit. She spotted a plexiform cell similar to those she'd seen before, set into the wall of the chamber.

She recognized the figure inside.

"Uncle Hoole!"

The Shi'ido pounded on the thick plexiform and yelled, but Tash could not hear him. Hoole's skin started to wrinkle, and Tash assumed he would change into something large, like a Wookiee or a gundark, and break down the transparent barrier. Instead, Hoole suddenly became a ratlike Ranat. Then a tiny crystal snake. Then he transformed into a large Gank, and then again into Hoole. Pausing only to take a deep breath, Hoole began another series of changes——so rapid that Tash could hardly tell what he looked like as the transformations became a blur. What was he doing?

Then Tash saw the vent in his cell wall. She put on her visor.

A virus stream poured into Hoole's cell. The walls and floor were covered. Even Hoole's skin was covered——Tash could see millions of the little wriggling organisms working their way along his skin, trying to work their way into his flesh.

But the minute Hoole changed shape, the virus lost its hold.

As long as Hoole kept changing shape, he was safe from the virus.

"Surprising, isn't it?" said a malicious voice.

Tash knew it was the evil Shi'ido before she turned around. He was standing behind her wearing an oxygen mask. He pointed at Hoole. "Perpetual metamorphosis. He changes shape too quickly for the virus to establish itself Ingenious, I have to admit. But I expect that from Hoole." His voice was muffled by the oxygen mask. "You know, he proved difficult to infect from the start. I tried using an injection, and it didn't work at all."

He looked at Tash. "I should have known you would be resourceful enough to escape the hot chamber," he said.

Tash backed away from him. "That's not all. I also seem to be immune to your virus! It's not infecting me."

She expected the Shi'ido to look stunned. Instead he only sniffed. "Nonsense. The reason the virus particles are not infecting you now is that you have been infected since the day you arrived. I did it to you myself."

At that moment, Tash felt the lump on her arm expand. Greenish-brown ooze leaked through her sleeve and began to spread along her arm. Tash pulled back her sleeve and saw that the bump was the size of her palm.

She *was* infected. And the virus was growing.

Chapter Eighteen

The Shi'ido smiled. "You see, you are not immune."

Tash felt her left arm grow heavy. She staggered and fell to her knees.

The false Dr. Kavafi had infected her with a shot in the arm that first day in the Infirmary. "You... said it was an antivirus to protect me," she said weakly.

"I lied." The Shi'ido stood over her. "I must say, you intrigue me," he admitted. "It has taken longer for the virus to begin replicating itself in you than in any other subject I experimented on."

He studied Tash as if she were a slab of meat. "I wonder why? You might be worth studying, but I suppose we will never know now."

When Tash looked at the quivering ooze on her arm, she gagged. To keep from staring at it, she focused on the Shi'ido. "You're killing people."

"I have my reasons," the Shi'ido replied. "But then you already have an inkling, don't you? At least, you know its name."

*Project Starscream.*The code words that had gotten her into the ziggurat. The code words they had discovered on board the ship.

Project Starscream. Tash had no doubt that she was looking at its mastermind.

Tash felt her anger, long held inside, spew out. "You vicious——" she started to yell.

The virus was quickly growing, up her arm to her shoulder. She could feel slime slowly sliding down her back. The ooze wasn't *on* her skin—it was growing *out* of her skin. She fell to her knees and struggled to keep from fainting.

Tash could feel the virus starting to control her movements. She tried to stand up, but her muscles didn't respond. Something was fighting for control of her body.

The virus was taking over.

"Please...," she said. "Help me."

"And ruin all my hard work?" the Shi'ido said mockingly.

Tash had never encountered anyone so absolutely evil.

The Shi'ido smiled. "No, I think I will leave you here instead. In a little while you will be just another mindless blob spreading my virus around the planet."

Tash tried to speak. Her jaw felt heavy. "Wh-Why?" She could barely get the word out.

The Shi'ido leered down at her. "Why? With this virus at my command, I will have a biological weapon capable of wiping out entire planets! Think of it, a virus that overwhelms its host, not killing it, but feeding off it, and spreading the virus again and again. Each victim becomes another virus bomb. This virus is a weapon that never runs out of ammunition."

Tash struggled to make her words clear. "Why... St-Star. ."

"What is Project Starscream all about? Is that what you are asking?" the Shi'ido taunted. He laughed a muffled laugh behind his oxygen mask. "I don't think I will tell you. Now excuse me once again, this time permanently. The pump is about to vent the virus into the atmosphere, and I think I will have the best view from orbit."

The Shi'ido looked at Hoole one last time, grinning triumphantly before turning and leaving.

Tash's fear gave way to outrage. He had no right to do this! It was horrible beyond understanding. Tash heard the word echo in her head. *Hate.*

She hated the Shi'ido.

Hoole pounded on the plexiform. Tash looked up and saw her uncle point to the side of the cell. There was a small control panel set into the wall. She could free him!

If she could reach him.

Gritting her teeth, Tash struggled to her feet. Anger and sheer stubbornness allowed her to stand. The weight of the virus blob on her shoulders made her feel as though she were carrying another person.

All she had to do was walk ten meters.

But her muscles seized up. The virus took hold of them, and she stumbled to her knees again.

Tash refused to give up. She felt driven by a powerful force: revenge. The Shi'ido had toyed with her and terrified her. He had injected her with a deadly virus and fooled her into thinking her uncle was a villain.

Tash staggered up the first step.

Revenge.

She took another step, and another.

Revenge. Revenge.

She would resist the virus. Her anger was stronger than the infection. She would win! She would have her revenge on the Empire and the mysterious Shi'ido.

In his cell Hoole pounded on the glass.

Tash was halfway to the control panel when the virus blossomed.

Thick tendrils of ooze burst from the center of the blob on her shoulder and wrapped themselves around her waist and legs, dragging Tash down to her knees.

The virus had grown stronger.

Tash stopped struggling. She couldn't defeat it. The angrier she got, the stronger the virus became. She couldn't fight against it.

She was only five meters from the control panel, but she knew she couldn't go any farther. She shuddered and blinked hot tears away. She was losing. Soon she would become another blob. She had lost.

At that moment Tash remembered what Dr. Kavafi said. Strong emotions changed the body, and the virus fed off of those changes. Strong emotions like anger.

And thinking of that, Tash remembered what Wedge had told her about the Jedi Knights*: They didn't get angry. They didn't hate their opponents. The Jedi always kept their minds more on what they were fighting for than what they were fighting against.*

Tash realized that she had been fighting against the virus, against the evil Shi'ido, against the Empire. She had been filled with anger and a desire for revenge. That wasn't the Jedi way.

Tash stopped struggling. She turned her mind away from the virus. She forgot about her hatred for the Empire. She forgot her desire for revenge on the Shi'ido.

Instead she thought about what she was fighting *for*. She thought about the home she'd had on Alderaan. She thought about Uncle Hoole, who had taken her in when she was orphaned, and about Deevee.

Tash felt her heart rate slow. Her breathing grew steady. She tried to remain calm. The anger drained out of her. And the virus started to lose its grip.

Tash felt the slimy tentacles drop away from her legs.

She took a step forward, leaving a thin trail of melting ooze on the stone behind her. The weight on her back felt lighter.

Tash thought about her brother, Zak, who would stand by her through a meteor storm.

More ooze dripped away from her body. She stood up straight. She did not hurry. She stayed calm, the way she imagined a Jedi would be.

She thought about her parents. She thought about how much she had loved them. All the Imperial warships in the galaxy could not take that away from her.

She felt her muscles free up. The disgusting ooze still covered her arm and shoulders, but she was free to move.

She took one step toward the control panel, and then another. In another moment she was there. She pushed her hand wearily against the control panel, and the plexiform barrier slid back.

With unbelievable speed Hoole jumped out of the cell and closed the door again.

"Tash!" Hoole said. For the first time since she'd known him, Tash saw the stern Shi'ido's face break into... well, almost a smile.

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Hoole located the controls and easily shut down the pump mechanism; then, with a shimmer of his gray skin, he transformed into a Wookiee. One swipe of his paw smashed the control panel, ruining the device. No virus clouds would fall on Mah Dala. Then he returned to Tash, shrinking back into his own form as he did.

"Uncle Hoole," Tash said weakly. "I thought you were working with the Empire. I thought you were behind this virus plot. I was stupid."

Hoole shook his head. "I allowed that Shi'ido to fool me. He was waiting for us. He allowed us to land on this planet in the first place. I walked into his trap, and I exposed you and Zak to danger."

"Am I... am I cured?" she asked. She could still feel the ooze sticking to her shoulders and see it on her arms.

"I'm not sure," her uncle confessed. "We will find out as soon as we get out of here."

"Dr. Kavafi," Tash said. "The real Dr. Kavafi. We have to get him."

"He is here?" Hoole started. "Where?"

Supported by Hoole, Tash brought her uncle down the passageway that led out of the pump room. The tunnel was deserted——the Shi'ido and whoever worked for him did not want to be on Gobindi when the plague virus flooded the atmosphere. After several twists and turns, Tash and Hoole found the virus chamber, where the battered Kavafi still waited. "Hoole!" Kavafi shouted when he saw them.

Taking the electroscope from Tash, Hoole confirmed that the virus clouds no longer floated in the room. The virus still did cover much of the walls and floor, but with Hoole as his guide, Kavafi was able to make his way to the door.

"Hoole! I can't believe——" the doctor began.

"We have no time for conversation, Doctor," Hoole said. "We must get out of this place."

They tried the tunnel that led to the turbolifts, but the path was blocked. Dozens of the virus blobs now filled the corridor——the evil Shi'ido's way of ensuring that no one came down through the lifts to discover his hidden chambers.

Hoole, wearing the electroscope, led the others on a twisting, turning route through the ziggurat's tunnels. They passed the virus chamber, and the pump room, and finally found a tunnel that led away from those chambers. Following this passageway, they came to a door, and Hoole quickly triggered the opening.

Tash found herself staring at the backs of Zak, Deevee, and the two Rebels.

Chapter Nineteen

"Tash! What happened!" Zak cried, seeing the coating of slime that covered Tash's arm.

"There is no time to explain," Hoole said. "We must leave."

Wedge fired his blaster at the blobs again. The blaster bolt left a tiny bum mark on the blobs' flesh. "Good idea... but I don't think it's what these blobs have in mind."

Hoole looked up at the high wall above them. "Hold on," he said to Tash. To the others he said, "Please make room."

His skin crawled across his bones as Hoole changed shape. He had become a mammoth frog, a creature Tash had seen in the galactic encyclopedia. She clung to its bumpy skin. The mammoth frog braced itself, then sprang into the air, just catching hold of the top of the wall.

Quickly Hoole repeated the act until all seven of them were on the wall, just as the blobs converged on the spot where they had stood. Only when they were all safe did Hoole say, "Dr. Kavafi, we need a cure for Tash."

The doctor shook his head sadly. "I wish I could help. I do not know of one."

Zak and Deevee exchanged glances, recalling the writing carved into the stones over the ziggurat door. "We do!"

Hoole made the trip up the ziggurat in seconds flat, his body a blur as he transformed into a flying, batlike creature called a rawwk. A few moments later they heard the whine of engines as he returned, piloting the *Shroud*. The others scrambled aboard.

"What now?" Wedge asked. "Even if we do make it back to the top we'll have stormtroopers to deal with."

"I think not," Hoole replied. "The landing bays were nearly empty when I reached the ship. The Empire expected this city to be full of the plague virus. I suspect we will find that the Infirmary is deserted."

Hoole was right. He piloted the ship to the top of the ziggurat and landed in the shadow of the Infirmary. The gray tower had been abandoned. Hoole pointed to the Infirmary. "Doctor Kavafi, I'm sure you will find everything you need to make an antidote in there."

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An hour later Tash lay in her bed, unconscious. Zak wiped perspiration from her forehead with a cloth.

"Are you sure she's all right?" he asked.

Dr. Kavafi nodded. "She is sweating out the last of the virus. This antidote is strong. It should return the victims to their normal state."

Wedge was anxious. "We shouldn't stay long. Eventually the Empire will send someone down to check on the progress of the virus."

"We'll leave shortly," Hoole replied. "But we may have an Imperial blockade to deal with."

Wedge grinned. "I can help. I have some experience running blockades."

The pilot looked down at Tash. "So these ziggurats that we thought were buildings were actually just giant containers for viruses? It's a good thing the Gobindi were smart enough to leave the antidotes carved on the outside."

Tash stirred. Then with a gasp, she opened her eyes and saw six concerned faces staring down at her.

"Am I... is it gone?" she asked.

"It seems to be," Dr. Kavafi said. "How do you feel?"

Tash took a deep breath. She shuddered, remembering the feeling of the virus crawling over her. "I need a vacation."

Everyone chuckled. Except Hoole, whose face was set in deep contemplation.

"Master Hoole, is something bothering you?" Deevee inquired.

Hoole nodded. "Indeed. I was just thinking——the Gobindi civilization vanished. If they could contain this virus, terrible as it is, imagine the power of the virus that eventually destroyed them."

Deevee's circuits shivered at the thought. "Let's just hope, wherever it is, it remains hidden forever."

Epilogue

Several days later and ten thousand light-years away, on a shuttle rocketing toward his own secret citadel, the evil Shi'ido scowled. His plan had failed. Hoole had discovered a cure, making his virus useless.

He would just have to start again with a new organism.

The Shi'ido put his hand on a small vial that was tightly sealed to prevent the escape of its deadly, electroscopic contents...

Book Four
The Nightmare Machine

Prologue

The scientist stormed into his laboratory, overturning tables and smashing vials of smoking liquid to the floor as he passed. His servants——both droids and living creatures——scattered to avoid his anger. The scientist reached the center of his giant fortress and sat down before five computer screens.

"Give me a progress report on Project Starscream," the scientist commanded.

One by one, the five screens came to life.

Three of them showed nothing but static.

Project Starscream was a top-secret program that the scientist had developed for the Emperor. There were six steps. Three of them had already taken place. The fourth and fifth were ready to go. The sixth and final stage was set to take place in the scientist's citadel itself.

The scientist had worked hard to keep his plans secret. Only a few people in the entire galaxy had known of Project Starscream's existence. No one suspected that the scientist was hatching a plot to bring the entire universe to its knees.

Until now.

Of the five experiments, three had already been ruined. The scientist glared at the blank screens.

D'vouran, the living planet. The zombies of Necropolis. And just a few days before, the plague virus on Gobindi. One by one, three of his experiments had been destroyed. Not by Rebel commandos, but by the most unlikely of enemies: two kids and a droid, led by a meddling anthropologist.

The scientist whispered his enemy's name like a curse. "Hoole."

Somehow Hoole and the brats he watched over had learned of Project Starscream. Although they didn't know everything yet, they knew enough to be dangerous. But they would not live long enough to learn the final secret. The scientist planned to make them pay for interfering with his experiments.

He looked up at the fourth view screen and smiled. Stage Four was ready for testing. And he knew just who to test it on....

Chapter One

"Don't make any sudden moves!" Zak hissed. Beside him, his sister, Tash, obeyed, and the two Arrandas froze.

Before them, a remote sentry droid hovered. It didn't look dangerous——it was only a tiny metal ball covered with small silver studs. But Zak, who tried to keep up with the latest technology, knew that it was a Balmorran HK-130 sentry droid. Each of those little silver studs could fire a stun beam strong enough to put a bantha to sleep.

It was early morning, and Zak and Tash were inside the headquarters of the Galactic Research Academy on the planet Koaan. Their uncle, Hoole, an anthropologist, kept an office at the Academy, although he rarely visited there. He spent most of his time traveling across the galaxy, studying alien cultures as part of his research. Zak and Tash had gone with him on several of these field trips. Lately, however, those trips had turned deadly. After their last adventure on the planet Gobindi——where Tash had nearly been killed by a deadly virus——Hoole had taken them directly to the Galactic Research Academy.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Tash whispered as the sentry droid continued to study them.

"Relax," Zak whispered.

"How can I relax with that thing scanning me?" his sister grumbled. "What if it fires at us?"

Zak held back a sigh of irritation. For someone who read all day, Tash didn't know much about technology.

"This is a trouble-seeker droid," he explained, trying to stay as calm as possible. "The Academy custodians probably let them loose overnight to watch for maintenance trouble or vandals. This one's just trying to decide if we're a threat or not. Once it makes up its mind, it will let us go."

"Or shoot us," Tash whispered. "Who's to say it's not going to——"

Before she could finish her sentence, the hovering ball of firepower turned and zipped away. Zak grinned. "See, technology can be your friend if you let it."

"Let's just get on with this," Tash replied.

Soon after they had arrived at the Research Academy, Uncle Hoole had vanished without a word, leaving Zak and Tash with a thousand unanswered questions.

They had decided to find the answers on their own.

They had located one of the Research Academy's core computer libraries. These weren't exactly maximum security zones, but Zak and Tash knew they weren't supposed to be there without supervision.

They were going to sneak a look at Uncle Hoole's computer files.

The two Arranda children had been adopted by Hoole seven months ago when their parents and everyone they knew had been killed during the destruction of the planet Alderaan. But in all those months, Hoole had told them almost nothing about himself——not even his first name.

During the last few weeks, Hoole had become even more mysterious than usual. He had taken them on several unexplained adventures, often disappearing on long errands without ever telling them where he was going, and leaving them in the hands of their caretaker, the droid DV-9. At first Zak and Tash hadn't

thought much about this. After all, Hoole was an anthropologist. It was his job to travel to distant planets and study the species that lived there.

However, Hoole's recent "studies" had taken them to some strange——and very dangerous——places. Tash and Zak soon learned that they had stumbled onto a scheme called Project Starscream, run by someone powerful in the Empire.

But had Uncle Hoole, a simple anthropologist, gotten himself involved in a galaxywide Imperial plot?

That's what Zak and Tash wanted to find out.

They entered the core computer library. It was a large room, lined with video screens and shelves of datadisks. Because it was so early, they had the room to themselves, and Zak quickly dropped into a seat in front of a computer terminal.

"It's easy to access the main computer files," Tash noted. "But the Academy personnel files are under tight security. How do you plan on getting in?"

"With this," Zak said confidently. He held up a small datadisk. "This is a decoder. Deevee had a fancier name for it——"

"A cypher," Tash finished.

"Right, hyperbrain," her brother agreed with a smirk. "Deevee designed it while trying to break down the computer files we found onboard the *Shroud*."

Tash nodded. On one of their recent journeys, they had acquired a starship called the *Shroud* and discovered that its computers contained coded information about the mysterious Project Starscream.

Zak continued. "This cypher will break through the code and let us look at Uncle Hoole's personnel files. Then we can figure out if he's involved in this Imperial plot."

Punching in a command on the control panel, Zak called up the personnel records. A second later the computer screen flashed the message

ACCESS DENIED. SECURITY CLEARANCE REQUIRED.

Zak slid his decoder disk into the computer slot and waited. The computer analyzed the disk and began to process the information. Zak smiled. "Just a few seconds..."

The computer screen briefly blinked off, then back on. The words reappeared.

ACCESS DENIED. SECURITY CLEARANCE REQUIRED.

"Hey!" Zak exclaimed. "Why didn't it work?"

"Because I disarmed it," said a voice that Zak and Tash knew well.

It was the stern voice of Uncle Hoole.

Chapter Two

The two Arrandas turned to face their uncle. Zak looked up into Hoole's dark eyes and his long, grim face. Hoole looked human——only a telltale shade of gray in his skin and his extra——long, delicate hands reminded Zak that his uncle was a member of the Shi'ido species. Of course, Hoole could *look* like anyone or anything he pleased. Zak had seen his uncle transform into creatures as large as a Wookiee and as small as a white rock mouse. Like all members of the Shi'ido species, Hoole was a shape-shifter.

And like other Shi'ido, Hoole usually looked either serious or seriously irritated. Now Zak expected that irritation to explode into anger.

To his surprise, Hoole merely removed the datadisk from the computer and said, "I guessed that your curiosity would lead you to the computer files as soon as I had given you some free time. And I have learned over the past month how resourceful you two can be." Zak thought he spotted the hint of a twinkle in Hoole's stern eye. "But my personnel history is not your affair. And I believe that the less you know about recent events, the better off you are."

"But——" Zak began to protest.

"Please do not argue," the Shi'ido stated in a voice that allowed no debate. "There is no time. We will be leaving shortly."

With a swirl of his dark blue robe, Hoole turned and strode from the computer library, with Zak and Tash following. "But we just got here," Zak said. "Where are you taking us now?"

"On vacation," their uncle responded. "Deevee will go with you. I have business where you cannot follow."

Zak and Tash could hardly believe their ears. "A vacation!" Zak exclaimed. "How can we think about relaxing now? We don't even know what Project Starscream is all about——"

"Zak. Tash." Hoole stopped. His Shi'ido features suddenly softened with concern. He looked back and forth between his niece and nephew.

"You both must understand that this is not a game. I made a grave mistake when this all began. I should have removed you to safety the moment events turned threatening. My inexperience as a guardian has exposed you to terrible danger, danger that even I do not yet fully understand. The being who created Project Starscream is evil and unpredictable. And I am sure that he and I will meet again."

Tash and Zak looked at one another. On their last adventure, they had come face-to-face with the scientist behind Project Starscream. He was a Shi'ido, just like Hoole. "Uncle Hoole," Tash asked, "who was that scientist?"

Hoole frowned. "His name," the Shi'ido said, "is Borborygmus Gog. He is extremely powerful and *extremely* dangerous. Now let's get going."

"But how do you know him?" Zak asked. "What are you going to do?"

Hoole's face was as still as a durasteel mask. "There are serious questions to be answered. I must continue my research. Now we must hurry." He started down the hall again as he continued to speak. "I am going to bring you somewhere safe, where you will blend in with a crowd of humans and other species your own age. I do not want you to tell anyone where you

are going, and once you are there, I do not want you to tell anyone your business."

"Where are we going?" Zak asked as he hurried after his uncle.

Hoole did not bother to turn as he replied, "To Hologram Fun World."

***

Hours later, on board their ship, the *Shroud*, Zak and the droid DV-9 stood at one of the ship's viewports and watched the transparent dome of Hologram Fun World grow larger as they approached. Fun World was not located on a planet——it had been built inside a transparent dome, suspended in the vacuum of space. Zak estimated that Fun World was about forty kilometers long, the size of a small city. As the *Shroud* drew closer, he made out buildings, mountains——even what looked like an ocean!

"Have you been here before, Deevee?" Zak asked.

Making use of all his humanlike qualities, the silver droid managed to look depressed. "Certainly not," he droned. "As you are well aware, I was a high-level research droid before Master Hoole adopted you and Tash. Visiting an amusement park was not part of my programming." The droid aimed his photoreceptors at the approaching space dome. "Still, Hologram Fun World is a technological wonder. They say the holographic images look, sound, feel, and even smell like the real objects they imitate."

"Prime," Zak said. "I'll get Tash."

Zak knew just where to find his sister. She could generally be found in her room, reading datastories about the now-extinct Jedi Knights. She believed in the Force and in the powers the Jedi Knights were said to have; she even dreamed of becoming a Jedi herself someday. Until recently Zak had teased Tash about her dream, but during their travels with Hoole, Tash had gotten

some strange, unexplainable feelings of dread. She seemed to sense when danger was near, just like (Zak had to admit) the legendary Jedi Knights supposedly could.

But when he reached Tash's cabin, she wasn't reading. She was sitting at her computer terminal.

"We're about to land," Zak said, flopping down on her bed.

The minute he saw the computer screen, Zak knew what Tash had been up to. She had been on the HoloNet, the galaxywide computer network. It was here that Tash had first learned about the Jedi Knights from a mysterious contact, code-named ForceFlow. Tash suspected that ForceFlow worked for the Rebels, who fought against the Empire. ForceFlow had warned her about their last trip, to the planet Gobindi. They should have paid more attention.

"I finally got through to ForceFlow," Tash said. "I asked him about Project Starscream and about Hoole."

"Did he know anything?" Zak asked.

Tash pointed to the screen. "Not much. He says that Project Starscream is a top-secret operation run by someone in the Empire. But he says it's not just military. It's scientific."

"We already knew that," Zak replied. "What about Uncle Hoole?"

"ForceFlow sent me this." Tash touched a button on her computer and the information on the screen changed. Zak was looking at Hoole's personnel file——the same file they had tried to break into at the Research Academy.

Zak scanned the readout eagerly, but the gleam in his eye faded quickly. According to the files, Hoole had been born on Sh'shuun, the homeworld of the Shi'ido species. He had been an excellent student on Sh'shuun, and eventually he had left his homeworld to study at the Galactic Research Academy, where he became a professor of anthropology. He had dedicated himself to recording the cultural habits of species across the galaxy.

"There's nothing here," he scoffed. "At least nothing we couldn't figure out on our own."

"Look closer," Tash prodded.

Zak scanned the file again and shrugged. He had read everything that appeared on the screen. Then he stopped.

He *hadn't* read what wasn't on the screen.

Four years of Hoole's life were missing.

Hoole had left his homeworld. Four years later, he enrolled at the Academy.

"What happened in between?" Zak asked.

Tash shook her head. "Even ForceFlow doesn't know. But I'll bet that's why Hoole is so mysterious now."

Zak studied the screen again. "By the way, who is this ForceFlow?" he wondered out loud. "How does he get so much information?"

"I don't know," his sister replied. "But I'm going to meet him someday. I told ForceFlow we were going to Hologram Fun World and that I'd contact him again later."

Zak paused. "Didn't Uncle Hoole warn us not to tell anyone where we were going?"

Tash shrugged. "But this is ForceFlow. He's on our side."

***

Tash and Zak reached the cockpit of the *Shroud* just as the ship arrived at Hologram Fun World's docking station. They watched as Hoole guided the ship toward one of the docking latches. There, the *Shroud* would firmly connect to the transparent dome and its airlock, which would allow travelers to enter Fun World without being exposed to the cold, airless void of space.

Hoole deftly touched a thruster control. The *Shroud* nudged forward a few meters and came to rest squarely next to one of the entrance bays. As soon as the ship came to a stop, Hoole turned to his niece and nephew. "This is where we separate. Hologram Fun World is an exciting place——and I know you will be safe here."

"Where are you going?" Zak asked. "When will you be back?"

Hoole paused. "I should be back in a few days. As for where I am going, it is better that you do not know."

The Shi'ido escorted Zak and Tash to the hatchway of the *Shroud*, where Deevee waited, holding two travel cases in his mechanical hands.

Hoole opened the hatchway, which led to a sterile, durasteel airlock. Zak and Tash stepped into the lock and turned to look at their uncle. The stern Shi'ido's face had suddenly softened. He looked almost sad. He raised one hand in a brief goodbye. The outer airlock door closed, and a moment later Zak felt the floor beneath his foot tremble as the *Shroud* launched itself away.

"I hope he knows what he's doing," Zak muttered.

"I think he does," Tash said.

"Master Hoole is quite capable of taking care of himself," Deevee replied. "Now, come. You have an entire holographic world to explore."

Zak, Tash, and Deevee opened the inner door to the transparent space dome and entered Hologram Fun World.

It was like stepping into a dream. Before them, a pathway paved with green gemstones led through a gate shaped like an ancient castle. Beyond the gate, Tash and Zak could see the tops of dozens of buildings gleaming with the polish of modern technology. No two buildings were alike, and thanks to Deevee's many lessons in interplanetary cultures, Zak recognized the architectural styles of at least a hundred different species.

Forest-covered mountains rose up to the very top of the dome, which glimmered fifty kilometers above their heads. Air shuttles full of visitors zoomed this way and that, dodging herds of winged lizards and flocks of blue-winged gibbit birds. Music drifted toward them from different locations within Fun World. Zak heard laughter and shouts of excitement and surprise from the crowds of tourists. He felt as if the entire galaxy had been stuffed inside the transparent walls of the dome.

"Prime," he whispered under his breath.

"No kidding," Tash agreed.

"I suppose," Deevee said, "if one likes this sort of thing."

As they walked toward the old-fashioned stone gate, two young humans on mini-skyhoppers whizzed by overhead. One of them turned a loop in midair, waved at Zak and Tash, then flew away with a laugh.

Maybe this place will be fun after all, Zak thought as he stepped through the gate.

His thoughts were interrupted by a sudden angry roar that shook the entire dome from top to bottom. A blast of stinking breath washed up against Zak like a hot wind. He looked up... and up... and up.

Into the drooling, fanged mouth of a very hungry rancor.

Chapter Three

Standing on its hind legs, the rancor was ten meters tall. It snorted and its nostrils flared as it let out another blast of fetid breath. The rancor roared, revealing double rows of jagged teeth. Its clawed hands raked the air, and the ground shook as the massive reptilian monster took a single step forward. Its tiny black eyes focused on Zak.

"Get back to the gate!" Tash yelled.

Zak and Tash turned and ran. The rancor charged after them, its footsteps thundering down the path. With each step, the giant predator cut the distance to his fleeing prey in half.

Zak looked over his shoulder and noticed that Deevee had not moved. He stood directly in the rancor's path, totally motionless. Tash and Zak stopped in mid stride.

"Deevee!" Tash yelled.

"He may have short-circuited," Zak guessed. "We've got to go back and get him."

"It's too late!"

Tash was right. The rancor reached the droid, reared back its head, and lunged. Deevee did not even flinch as two thousand kilograms of flesh-eating monster fell on him.

And passed right through him.

Zak and Tash gasped in surprise. The rancor swept right through Deevee as though it were made of smoke. It stopped a few steps beyond the droid, then, with an ear-shattering roar, the rancor vanished like an illusion or..."

"A hologram!" Zak guessed. "That rancor wasn't real at all."

"Correct," said Deevee, coming back down the path for his two charges.

"It was real enough to fool me," Tash said with a nervous laugh. "I thought that thing was going to crush you, Deevee."

The droid simulated a bored sigh. "That's because you lack my delicate instrumentation. I knew instantly that the rancor was not real because it did not register on my sensors. There were no life-readings emanating from the hologram, so my program ignored it. It wasn't real." The droid waved one mechanical hand across the scene before them. "Hologram Fun World might be exciting for humans and other species that rely on their biological senses, but for a droid, well, it's rather boring."

"Boring!" Zak exclaimed. He watched a Star Dragon pass overhead, curling its way gently through the air. "This place is anything but boring. Let's check out some of the rides."

"Not yet," Deevee insisted. "We should find lodging first and then——"

But Zak had already started toward the nearest attraction.

He hurried up the steps to a building that resembled a small temple, with white columns around the outside. An electronic sign at the top of the steps announced the attraction in a dozen of the galaxy's most common languages. "Hall of Reflection," Zak read. *Hall of Reflection?* Zak wondered. *Is this some sort of meditation chamber?*

He peeked inside, but the entranceway was dark. Using his hands, Zak felt his way down a narrow hall that opened up into empty space. Zak took a few more steps before he heard a click as automatic glow rods activated, flooding the room with light.

He was surrounded by a dozen gruesome trolls with hunched backs, hair that seemed to explode out of their heads in spikes, and twisted faces.

"*Agh!*" he shouted in surprise.

"*Agh!*" a dozen hunchbacks shouted at the same time.

Zak turned to run, and the hunchbacks turned with him. As he lunged back into the safety of the hallway, the hunchbacks vanished without a sound.

Zak stopped running. This place was becoming stranger by the minute. Curious, he turned and stuck his head back into the lighted room.

A dozen gruesome trolls also poked their heads out through a dozen doors. When Zak raised an eyebrow, so did they. When he scratched his head in confusion, they did, too.

"Hall of Reflection," he said. "I get it."

Zak stepped boldly into the room and stared at the trolls—— which were actually twelve images of him. He was surrounded by twelve mirrors that took his reflection and warped it into something almost unrecognizable. He laughed out loud, and his reflected image suddenly became even more ridiculous. One of its eyes bulged as large as a port hole, while the other shrank to a tiny, wrinkled pit in his face.

"It's an improvement," Tash said wryly. She and Deevee had followed him into the Hall of Reflection and were standing at the edge of the hallway. "I especially like your hair."

"Very funny," Zak replied. "Let's see what it does to you."

Tash stepped into the room, and the gruesome trolls were instantly joined by twelve gnarled crones. Tash's long, braided blond hair looked like a tentacle writhing out of the back of her head, and her eyes shrank back into her brow as her chin swelled up and out.

"This is the most amazing funhouse mirror I've ever seen," she said. When she spoke, her reflections' enormous jaws flapped wildly.

"I'm programmed to imitate human functions, but I'm not sure I comprehend this sort of humor," Deevee confessed. "These trick mirrors intentionally distort one's image. And that is funny?"

Zak rolled his eyes. "Let's see if there's more."

They searched the mirrored room until they found a door——hidden behind one of the twelve reflections. Stepping through it, Tash and Zak entered a mirror maze. Pieces of their reflections were everywhere sometimes only their feet were visible, and sometimes only their heads. Sometimes the reflections were true, and sometimes the Fun World mirrors twisted their images into shapes that were stretched, squeezed, crushed, or swollen to galactic proportions. Zak even found a set of mirrors that transformed him into an alien. In one mirror, his face stretched out into a snout and his ears drooped down. Even his skin changed color, until he looked like a pudgy Ortolan.

"This is excellent!" he called out to Tash, who was walking in the other direction.

In the next mirror, his entire face folded in on itself and his skin swelled into the tough, leathery hide of a somewhat Zak like Kitonak.

Zak stepped up to the next mirror in the hallway. This image was human and very handsome——but taller than he was, with smooth dark skin, a carefully trimmed mustache, and a dashing smile.

Now this is more like it, Zak thought. He struck a swashbuckler's pose.

But instead of imitating the pose, the reflection reached out and grabbed him by the shoulder.

Chapter Four

"Help!" Zak cried as the hand clutched at his shirt.

"Relax," said a smooth, confident voice. "I didn't mean to startle you."

The image stepped forward, and Zak realized with relief that he hadn't been looking at another reflection. He'd been looking at a living, breathing human being.

"You nearly made me jump into hyperspace," he said, trying to calm his pounding heart.

The man flashed a roguish smile. His age was hard to guess. He might have been twenty or forty. He had the casual confidence of a traveler who'd been everywhere and done everything, but also the sly look of a young scoundrel with his sharp eyes on a new opportunity for riches.

"Sorry about that," the man said in a slow drawl. "You almost ran into me."

"Zak! Are you all right?" Tash yelled. A dozen reflections of his sister appeared before the real Tash finally turned the corner, with Deevee close behind her. Tash stopped when she saw her brother talking to a stranger. "Oh. Hello."

"And hello to you," the man said. He took Tash's hand gently in his. "I was just about to introduce myself to your friend... Zak, is it? My name is Lando Calrissian. A pleasure."

"That's my sister, Tash," Zak said.

"And I am DV-9, the caretaker for these young humans," said Deevee, inserting himself into the conversation. His program bristled at the intrusion of a stranger.

"I thought he was another reflection until he grabbed me," Zak explained.

Tash nodded. "This place is pretty confusing. I was just around the corner when you yelled, but it took me all this time to find the path."

"Yeah, it's prime here," Zak said. "No wonder Hologram Fun World is so popular."

Lando's ears perked up. "You really like it here?" Zak laughed. "We've only just arrived, but so far, so good."

"Listen," Lando said, "I'm a businessman. I'm looking for, well, investments, and I'm considering buying part ownership in Fun World. But before I do, I want to get the opinions of some Fun World visitors——especially kids your age."

"And?" Deevee asked. His analytical computer brain told him this was leading somewhere.

Lando turned his charm on Deevee. "And I was hoping Zak and Tash would let me tour the park with them. That way I can get an honest feel for their reactions. Which parts of the Fun World are actually fun, and which ones aren't. Things like that."

"I'm afraid I can't allow that," Deevee replied. "I have been charged with the care of these humans, and my master would not appreciate their taking up with a complete stranger."

Lando spread his hands out innocently and smiled again. "You do me an injustice. I haven't been doubted like this since the Battle of Tanaab."

"You were at the Battle of Tanaab?" Zak asked. He had a passion for starships, and loved to read about famous starship battles.

Lando shrugged with an air of false humility. "I played a small part in that skirmish."

"I hear those Norulackian pirates were using supercharged Incom BG2300 engines," Zak said. "Were they really as fast as——"

"Excuse me," Deevee interrupted. "But as I said, I am responsible for these children, and I am programmed to be wary of strangers."

Lando frowned. "I see. Well, if you change your mind, I'll be in the park for a few days. I'm staying at a visitor's lodge called the Gravity Well. It's near the center of Fun World."

Lando flashed a dashing smile and turned away. "Deevee, that was rude," Tash scolded.

Deevee stiffened. "Tash, after the number of unsettling events that have befallen us recently, I suggest we remain cautious of strangers."

"Actually," Zak said thoughtfully, "seeing Fun World with Lando might not be such a bad idea. If Uncle Hoole's worried that someone might be looking for two humans and a droid, then maybe they're not looking for *three* humans and a droid. Seeing the park with Lando might throw anyone trying to track us down off the trail."

Deevee considered. "I'm not sure I agree, Zak. Still, your logic is sound——"

"Great!" Zak said without letting the droid finish. "Hey, Lando!" he called, chasing after the dashing entrepreneur.

***

Zak, Tash, and Deevee caught up with their new companion, who led them through a dizzying maze of rides, attractions, and crowds until they reached the visitor's lodge called the Gravity Well. Groups of tourists poured in and out of its doors, and the four newcomers easily blended in with the mob.

"What's that?" Zak asked, pointing to a large structure across the courtyard from the Gravity Well. The building's durasteel

walls were so well-polished that they acted like mirrors, reflecting the amazing sights and activities of the park.

"That's the administration building," Lando replied. "I have some meetings there with the park owner tomorrow."

The Twi'lek clerk at the check-in counter knew Calrissian by name, and the attendant droid fawned over Lando as it showed them to their rooms.

Since it was getting late in the day, Deevee suggested that they get some rest before heading into Fun World tomorrow. Tash immediately settled herself in to read a datadisk on her datapad. Zak, however, was restless. An entire holographic galaxy lay just outside his room, but he could not get to it until morning. After several hours of watching boring holoprograms, he wandered into the hallway, down to Lando's room, and buzzed for entry.

"Come!" said a smooth voice, and the automatic door slid open.

Zak saw Lando sitting at a table across from three people. He recognized the Twi'lek from the reception desk, who sat next to a very large humanoid. If he was human, he was the ugliest human Zak had ever seen. Part of his face was hidden by a ragged scarf. Beside him sat a two-mouthed Ithorian, also known as a Hammerhead.

"Zak!" Lando said with a friendly grin. "Nice to see you. Come on in. We'll he done here in a minute."

The humanoid growled, "Just play your cards, Calrissian."

"Patience, Dengar," Lando said happily. "I'm just being sociable to my young friend here." Lando turned his brilliant smile on Zak. "Have a seat. Ever watched a game of sabacc?"

Zak shook his head and sat down.

He had heard of sabacc, of course. It was the most popular gambling game in the galaxy. High-stakes sabacc games were played for thousands of credits, or the ownership of star cruisers and even whole planets.

The center of the table was covered in piles of multicolored chips, and all the players looked anxious——except Lando. The

Twi'lek nervously rubbed one of the two thick tentacles that grew out of the back of his head. The human, Dengar, scowled down at his cards. The Ithorian hummed anxiously in stereo out of his two mouths. Lando Calrissian yawned.

"Bet's to you, Calrissian," Dengar growled.

"Ah, yes," Lando replied with an air of boredom. "Let's make it interesting, shall we? I bet a thousand credits." Lando took a stack of sabacc chips from his personal collection and dumped them into the central pile.

"A thousand credits!" the Twi'lek moaned. "You've already taken everything I had. I can't bet that." Lando smiled. "Then I guess you're out."

The Twi'lek slapped his cards down on the table and stroked his tentacled head furiously.

The Ithorian piped a grating, worried note out of its two mouths and laid its cards down on the table, dropping out of the game.

"I'm in," Dengar growled. He tossed more chips into the pile. He had only a few left. "Time to deal the last card."

Lando reached over to a small box——an electronic shuffler that randomly mixed the cards——and pulled out two. The first one he gave to Dengar. The second he kept for himself. As he added the card to his collection, Lando's grin widened. "Ah, sweet starlight," he crooned. He picked up another pile of chips. "I bet another thousand."

"Stang!" Dengar swore. "That bet'll wipe me out. But I gotta see your cards."

Lando looked Dengar right in the eye. "Then you better toss your credits in the pot."

Zak watched Dengar and Lando. Dengar fingered his last few chips and glared at his opponent, while Lando merely smiled and waited calmly. His hands were poised over his cards, ready to reveal his hand. Everything about him promised victory.

Finally Dengar made his decision. "I'm out!" he roared, throwing his cards onto the table.

Lando sighed. "All right." With a grand flourish, he swept all the chips into his pile.

"Wait a minute," Dengar growled. "Show me your cards."

"I don't have to show you anything," the gambler replied. "You went out. That means I don't have to reveal my hand."

"Show me your cards!" Dengar roared. He reached for the blaster on his hip.

Quicker than lightspeed, Lando pulled a small black object from his sleeve. It was pointed at Dengar's heart before the angry man could draw his own weapon. "Get out of here, Dengar," he said softly. "Before my little hold-out blaster puts a hole in you big enough to fly a star freighter through."

Dengar continued to scowl, but he carefully moved his hand away from his gun. "You ain't heard the last of me, Calrissian," he promised as he backed out of the room. He was followed by the Twi'lek and the Ithorian. Only when they were gone did Lando show any sign of nervousness, releasing a huge sigh of relief as he put his hold-out blaster on the table.

"Sorry you had to see that, Zak," the gambler said as his smile returned. "Sometimes these games get out of hand if all the players aren't gentles like myself."

"Why didn't you want to show him your cards?" Zak asked. "I mean, if you had such a winning hand..."

He turned over Lando's cards and gasped. He was no expert card player, but he knew enough to see that Lando had the worst hand possible!

"Y——You would have lost!" Zak stammered. "You were bluffing the whole time! It's lucky he didn't stay in the game."

"Kid, luck's got nothing to do with it," Lando boasted. "Here's your first lesson in sabacc and in life, my young friend. Nothing is what it seems. " He picked up his small hold-out blaster——and Zak gasped again. The "blaster" was actually a small, harmless remote-control device.

"This is the homing beacon to my ship," the roguish gambler said with a laugh. "As I said, nothing is what it seems. Want to learn how to play?"

Before he knew it, Zak was deep into a lesson in sabacc gambling. He learned how to bluff an opponent into thinking he had a good hand, and to guess when his opponent was bluffing, too.

"A good rule to follow," Lando explained, "is that if the other guy is acting normal under unusual circumstances, you can bet he's bluffing."

Lando showed Zak how to operate the small electronic shuffler by inserting the seventy-two cards and squeezing the grip. Lando made it look easy, but when Zak tried it, he found out that the electronic shuffler was more complicated than it seemed.

"Watch out!" Lando yelled. He ducked just in time as all seventy-two cards came flying out of the shuffler's chute in a rain of plastic.

"Sorry," Zak said.

"The shuffler is touch-sensitive," Lando explained. "It takes practice. Keep that one until you get it down."

"Thanks!" Zak replied. "And thanks for showing me how to play sabacc."

"My pleasure," the gambler replied. "Just remember that tomorrow you'll return the favor when we tour Hologram Fun World together."

***

The next day, Tash, Zak, and Deevee met Lando in front of the Gravity Well, and together they plunged into the holographic craziness of Fun World.

There were crowds of people everywhere. Zak spotted members of a hundred familiar species in the first hour, and a hundred other species he'd never seen before. They strolled past

magic shows that made entire audiences vanish for a full minute, and holodrama theaters where the characters in the stories were projected ten meters high.

But the greatest attractions were the rides. Zak and Tash hoverskied down the side of an exploding volcano. They entered the Star Chamber, an enormous room that contained a hologram of the entire galaxy. In the chamber, the two Arrandas walked across the cosmos, striding past planets shrunk to the size of blumfruit and stars no larger than melons. Outside, they hopped onto the back of a passing Star Dragon and rode it around the top of Fun World's giant protective dome. The Star Dragon dropped them off at the shores of an inlet that led out to an impossibly large ocean. The digital sign at the entrance to the beach read:

WELCOME TO SWEETSAND LAGOON.

"Isn't this amazing?" Tash yelled.

"I could stay here forever!" her brother replied. "I'm beginning to think this might be a good investment," Lando murmured.

"It's really all an illusion," Deevee hastened to point out. "In reality, most of what you are seeing is not actually there."

"Don't ruin it," Zak interrupted. "We know they're holograms, too, but it's still fun. Can't you just pretend?"

"I am a scientific research droid," Deevee sniffed. "Once I acquire information, I cannot simply *forget* it."

"Your loss." Zak shrugged and turned to his sister. "Let's go for a swim."

Jumping off the dragon's back, they swam out to a waiting Whaladon——an enormous fish the size of a starship. As the Whaladon floated patiently on the water's surface, Zak and Tash crawled up along its scaly, barnacle-covered side to its back, then hung on for dear life. With a swipe of its ten-meter tail, the Whaladon sped off on a cruise along the holographic shore.

Finally the Whaladon deposited them back at the Sweetsand Lagoon. Lando was just asking them which rides they liked best when he was interrupted by an ear-shattering roar.

The rancor had returned.

Instinctively they all turned as the carnivore charged at them. But no one ran. They watched calmly as the rancor pounced on them, raking its huge claws toward their bodies.

The claws passed through them as harmlessly as a breeze.

"It must roam around the park, scaring the heck out of the new visitors," Zak guessed.

Together they left the lagoon and wandered back in among the attractions. Down one of Fun World's side streets, they saw a small building with a sign,

THE ANYWHERE ROOM.

"What's this?" Zak asked the attendant droid who stood at the door.

"The Anywhere Room," replied the droid in a pleasant voice. "This room will take you to your heart's desire. See the flaming falls on the fire rivers of Sittana. Sit on the Emperor's throne. Visit your homeworld. Whatever you desire, The Anywhere Room will take you there."

"Even——" Tash said hesitantly, "even if your homeworld was destroyed?"

"If it ever existed, it's stored in here," the droid said with a mechanical jerk toward the door. "We have holograms of every known planet in the galaxy."

"Tash," Zak said, guessing his sister's thoughts. "We could go back to Alderaan. We could see our house again!"

Brother and sister came forward, just to the doorway. With just one step, they could enter the room. They could revisit the planet that the Empire had destroyed. They could actually go home.

Neither took another step.

"We could go home," Tash said. "But it wouldn't be real. It would just be a hologram."

Zak nodded. "I don't want to."

They turned away.

"You're from Alderaan?" Lando asked. Like many people in the galaxy, he had heard that the Empire's doomsday weapon, the Death Star, had blasted Alderaan to rubble. "I'm sorry."

"Thanks," Tash managed to say.

Zak said nothing. He'd been happy a few minutes before. For a brief moment, he'd forgotten about his parents and his homeworld. He'd even forgotten about Project Starscream. Now it all came hack, and he needed to take his mind off it.

Farther down the lane, Zak saw a small-domed building with a sign outside that announced:

HOLOGRAM FUN WORLD'S LATEST ATFRACTION: THE NIGHTMARE MACHINE! He went to investigate.

The only entrance to the building was a tall archway, which was being polished by a maintenance droid. Zak read another sign. This one was placed over the archway:

FACE THE ULTIMATE FEAR...IF YOU DARE.

Zak could not resist a challenge. He started to enter the dome.

"Pardon me, young gentle," said the boxy maintenance droid. "This attraction is still under construction. It is not ready for visitors."

"Okay," Zak said, still curious. He wanted to see just what The Nightmare Machine could possibly be. "You missed a spot right over there." He pointed to a portion of the wall five meters distant.

"Thank you," replied the droid, turning to investigate.

While its back was turned, Zak entered The Nightmare Machine.

He stepped into a small hallway lit only by dim maintenance glowpanels. They were just bright enough for Zak to see a few tools, such as hydrospanners and sonic hammers, strewn on the ground among extra pieces of durasteel and wiring.

Zak was about to leave when he heard a noise at the far end of the hallway. Consumed with curiosity, Zak walked quietly toward the noise. Light came from a room at the end of the hall.

A voice spoke, cold and sharp as a vibroblade. "Get them on the tables. Hurry!"

Carefully keeping himself in the shadows of the hallway, Zak peered into the room.

And found himself looking into the evil, gray face of the scientist who ran Project Starscream.

Zak was looking into the eyes of Borborygmus Gog himself.

Chapter Five

It took Zak one terrifying moment to realize that Gog could not see him in the shadows. The Shi'ido scientist was standing next to a large black transport cube. Before him were two medical tables. Gog was looking to the left of the door, where four men in black uniforms dragged two young humans toward the tables.

Zak recognized the two human kids he had seen flying the hoverskis yesterday. They struggled to break free, but they were gagged and their arms were bound; they were no match for the four men who lifted them onto the tables.

Zak felt fear trickle down his spine like icy-cold water. How could Gog possibly be at Hologram Fun World? Had he followed them? If so, why hadn't he captured them already?

Zak's heart pounded. He couldn't just watch as Gog tormented two helpless kids. He had to do something.

Before he could move, Gog spoke. "Now," said the Shi'ido. "Let us see if our little experiment works."

He pressed a button on the side of the large black cube and a panel slid open with a hiss.

No, the panel hadn't hissed. Something *inside* the transport cube had hissed. From the shadows of the container, something shuffled forward.

First, two arms appeared. The hands were long, with thin, splayed fingers. The arms themselves were terribly thin, like skin stretched tightly over dried bones. And each arm had two sets of elbows, which made them quiver and swerve in weird directions.

Next came the creature's head. Its face was vaguely human, but the head was enormous and round. Above two red eyes, the skull was crisscrossed with hundreds of wormlike veins, as though the creature's brain were about to push up through the skull. Its lips were thin and tightly shut, and the corners of its mouth stretched back almost to its tiny ears.

Zak was grossed out. He stifled a cry of fear as the creature crawled spiderlike out of its box and loomed over the two victims. It looked at Gog, who nodded at it. Then the creature opened its mouth. Instead of a tongue, two tentacles leaped out, wriggling in the air. One tentacle struck the top of each captive's head and attached itself. The two teens stiffened in shock, then fainted.

Zak gasped. It was a tiny sound, but it was enough to turn the heads of Gog and his henchmen. The Shi'ido's dark eyes stared directly at Zak, and the scientist smiled cruelly.

Zak didn't hesitate. He turned and ran as fast as his feet would carry him. He burst out of The Nightmare Machine, past the bustling maintenance droid, and into the brightly lit air of Fun World, where Tash, Deevee, and Lando were waiting.

"Zak, we were just looking for you——" Tash said.

"We've got to get out of here!" Zak interrupted. "He's here! He's here!"

"Who's here?" Deevee asked.

Zak pulled on Tash's arm. "The scientist! Gog! The one behind Project Starscream!"

"That's impossible!" Tash said. "Why would he be here?"

Zak looked back toward The Nightmare Machine. He was surprised to see that no one had followed him, but that didn't ease his fears. "I don't know. Maybe he followed us. But he's here. And he's got some kind of... of creature with him!"

Lando was confused. "Project Starscream? Gog? What's going on?"

"We've got to get out of here!" Zak insisted.

"How?" Deevee asked calmly. "We have no starship. Master Hoole will not return for several days."

"Will someone please tell me what's going on?" Lando insisted.

Tash, remembering her uncle's warning to tell no one, said carefully, "It looks like Zak saw someone in The Nightmare Machine that we think may be a-a criminal."

Lando considered. "Maybe I can help. I know the baron administrator of Hologram Fun World. He can help you with this criminal, and I know he'll ensure your safety."

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A few minutes later, Lando brought Zak, Tash, and Deevee to the doors of the administrative building at the center of Fun World. Zak could see his own reflection in the gleaming durasteel walls as they entered the automatic doors.

Lando took them to the top floor, ten levels above ground. The entire top floor of the administrative building was taken up by a single circular office, with windows facing in all directions. Star Dragons swooped around the top of the building, and hoverjet racers hurtled passed the windows of the baron administrator's office. From that office, they could look out over the entire Fun World.

"Not bad," Lando whistled appreciatively. "I could get used to this."

The baron administrator was a man named Danna Fajji. He was short and chubby, with jovial red cheeks and a scruffy red beard at the end of his chin.

Leaving out all references to Project Starscream, Zak told Fajji of the horror he'd seen in The Nightmare Machine——of the Shi'ido scientist and the kidnapped teens. Even Lando shuddered

as Zak described the horrible, double-jointed brain creature, its tentacled mouth, and its enormous head. "It was huge, and covered in wriggling veins!"

Danna Fajji only chuckled. "I assure you that everything is under control," he replied.

"But there are two kids being tortured back there!" Zak insisted. "And there's a monster!"

Again Fajji smiled. "Please, believe me. I'll even take you back there myself."

"Come on. We might as well check it out," Lando told Zak.

"Well... okay," Zak agreed, deciding that not much could happen with Lando there. The chubby red-haired man led them all back through the eye-dazzling attractions of Fun World until they reached The Nightmare Machine.

"We shouldn't go in," Zak warned. "We should have security people here, or something."

Fajji shook his head. "It's unnecessary. Watch."

Fajji stepped boldly into the domed building. Tash followed him, with Deevee and Lando bringing up the rear.

Zak hesitated. Maybe he had been fooled by a hologram. That's what this place was all about, after all. He looked around Fun World. Sounds of laughter and chords of happy music floated toward him from all directions. He looked to his left, toward the sunny lagoon with its sparkling water. This was definitely not a place to be afraid of. Shaking his head at his own silliness, he hurried after the others.

The minute he stepped inside, Zak could tell that something was different. The door at the end of the hall was wide open now, and he could see into the room beyond. There were no examination tables, no henchmen, no black transport cube, and certainly no mad Shi'ido scientist.

The room was empty.

"You see," Danna Fajji said. "I told you everything was under control."

"I... I don't get it," Zak said. "I saw him. I saw that... that creature as clearly as I see you standing there."

"Zak, are you sure?" Tash asked.

"I thought I was sure," Zak said, stepping into the room to look around. "But how could they have packed everything up so quickly? I don't get it." He looked at Danna Fajji. "I guess you're right. There's nothing to be afraid of. "

Danna Fajji grinned. "Oh. I wouldn't say *that*."

As he spoke, the lights went out and Zak was plunged into complete darkness.

"Tash! Deevee!" he called out in fear. "Lando!" There was no answer but a sudden soft sound coming from the floor around him.

Scratch, scratch. Scratch, scratch.

"Tash?" he said faintly.

Scratch, scratch.

Zak heard the skitter of tiny feet. *Thousands* of tiny feet. They scraped along the ground all around him. Something brushed across his foot. Then again, and again.

Scratch, scratch, scratch!

Something crawled up his pant leg. Panicked, Zak tried to brush it away, and felt something soft and hairy and many-legged cling to the back of his hand. Then it started to crawl up his arm.

More of the skittering creatures were crawling up his pant legs. He felt them crawling inside his pant legs and inside his shirtsleeves, pushing their way up his shirt, crawling out from under his collar and scrambling around the back of his neck. Zak wildly thrashed his arms and legs about, trying to get the horrible creatures off him.

He felt something tugging and biting at his hair. Zak opened his mouth to scream, and a dozen hairy legs scrambled past his lips.

Chapter Six

Zak stumbled around the pitch-black room, crushing little insect bodies beneath his feet, scratching and pulling at the creatures that covered his body.

"Get off! Get off me!" he cried, spitting the creatures out of his mouth. Using his hands, Zak blindly groped around until he found the wall, then began searching for the door. But it was impossible to concentrate——small, hairy insects were crawling through his hair and across his eyes.

Just when Zak thought he couldn't stand it anymore, a door opened in the darkness. A wide beam of light poured into the room, and through it stepped Danna Fajji, Baron Administrator of Hologram Fun World.

"End simulation," Fajji said calmly.

Quicker than lightspeed, the feeling of creepy-crawly legs vanished and the lights went on. Zak looked at the floor, expecting to see bloodstains and the squashed bodies of the creatures he had stepped on, but the floor looked like it had just been polished.

"What——what *was* that?" Zak gasped.

"That," Danna Fajji explained, "was a hologram of one of your fears."

Zak shuddered. "Tash, Lando, did you feel them, too? Little crawling things. They were everywhere."

Tash shook her head. She looked a little pale. "No——no crawling things. Heights. I was on this tiny ledge, hanging over a bottomless pit. I was just about to fall when the lights came on!"

Lando stroked his mustache thoughtfully. Whatever he had seen, he kept it to himself.

"What is this place?" Zak asked.

"Let us step outside and I'll tell you," Danna Fajji replied. As soon as all five of them were outside the building, Fajji proudly announced, "This is The Nightmare Machine. It's the latest addition to Hologram Fun World."

"What does it do?" Tash asked. "I mean, besides scare people."

Fajji laughed. "Nothing! That's what it does. It's The Nightmare Machine. Once you enter this room, The Nightmare Machine scans your mind for your greatest fears. Then it shows them to you."

"That doesn't sound like fun to me," Lando said. "Who would pay to be scared?"

"Actually, Master Calrissian," Deevee answered, "being scared is a popular form of entertainment in many cultures. Humans actually pay to take heart-stopping roller-coaster rides, watch frightening holoprograms, and even read horror stories. It's quite beyond my capacity."

"Exactly," Danna Fajji agreed. "People like to be scared. And this machine takes fright to new heights. It reaches into your brain, pulls out your worst fears, and recreates them in a hologram."

"Then... what I saw earlier... with the scientist and The Nightmare Machine creature..." Zak began.

"...was just The Nightmare Machine doing its job," Danna Fajji said. "Obviously the image of this scientist represents something scary in your mind, and The Nightmare Machine just made it real."

"It makes sense," Tash whispered to her brother. "That is what was on our minds."

Zak shook his head. "But what I saw earlier was so real. I mean, these little hairy legs in the dark were bad"——he shivered, remembering——"but it wasn't as realistic as the scientist and the monster and those two kids."

The baron administrator nodded. "Unfortunately you're right. The program isn't always consistent. The Nightmare Machine still has a few bugs to be worked out. That's why it's not open to the public yet."

"Excuse me, sir," Deevee said. "But did you say the program scans the brains of beings and records their worst fears? As far as I know, no one has the technology to read minds. Only certain telepathic beings can do that."

Fajji puffed up proudly. "We've broken that technology barrier."

"Really?" Lando said, intrigued.

"How does it work?" asked Zak. "Can we see the machinery?"

"No," Fajji replied quickly. "That's classified information. We don't want anyone copying our inventions, you know."

"So once you're inside, how does the ride end?" Lando asked.

"There are only two ways," the baron administrator said. "The first is, you stay through to the end of the holograms. The Nightmare Machine will scan your brain and put you through a series of increasingly frightening scenes. If you can get to the last one——your own ultimate fear——then you win the game and it ends. If you can't take it, then all you have to do is say 'End simulation!' and the program will end." He paused. "So, now that you know what you're getting into, do you want to go for another ride?"

Zak and Tash looked at each other. "Let's do it," Tash said.

"Sure," Zak replied reluctantly.

Danna Fajji escorted Zak and Tash into the building, with Lando and Deevee following behind them. "Enjoy yourselves,"

Fajji said with a smile, and guided the two Arrandas into the fearful room.

Zak had hardly taken his first step before the scene around him changed. The room vanished, and Zak found himself in the middle of a wide field, standing on his hovering skimboard. Tash was standing behind him, clinging to him to keep her balance on the narrow antigravity board. Before Zak could speak, Lando and Deevee jumped onto the board as well.

"It's too heavy!" Zak said as the skimboard wobbled. "It's going to sink. "

"It better not!" Lando shouted. "Because we're being chased by Cyborrean battle dogs!'

Zak turned and saw a pack of massive, thick-bodied dogs with wide jaws and short blood-red hair charging toward them. They howled viciously.

Instinctively Zak hit the skimboard's accelerator. But the hoverboard was slowed down by too much weight, and it lurched forward sluggishly.

"C'mon, Zak!" Tash yelled, "get this thing going before it——*agh*!"

Before Tash could finish her sentence, the first dog reached the skimboard. Its powerful jaws clamped down on the back of Tash's tunic, and one twist of its thick neck pulled her from the safety of the board.

"Tash!" Zak yelled.

His sister hit the ground hard. She rolled to one side and tried to scramble to her feet. But it was too late. The battle dogs attacked, and Tash fell under a pile of bristling fur and sharp fangs.

"They're killing her!" Deevee wailed.

"Tash!" Lando called out.

Zak knew he had to stop the battle dogs before they tore Tash apart. "End simulation!" he ordered. But the simulation did not end.

Chapter Seven

Tash could hardly be seen beneath the swarm of savage dogs.

"End simulation!" Zak cried out. Tears of fear and frustration burned in his eyes. "End simulation!"

It was no use. The program would not stop.

Without thinking, Zak leaped from the skimboard. He had been afraid of the invisible insects earlier, and he was afraid of the battle dogs now. But none of that compared to his fear of losing his sister. He charged into the dog pack, trying to pull them off Tash.

One of the dogs turned and growled, baring a mouth full of sharp fangs. It crouched down, ready to spring at Zak's throat.

"End simulation," Tash's calm voice stated.

The entire pack of battle dogs melted away. So did the field in which Zak stood. He was back inside The Nightmare Machine again. Tash was standing across the room from him.

"T——Tash!" Zak sputtered, caught between fear and confusion. "You're okay! But... but I thought we were in the hologram together. You were being mauled by Cyborrean battle dogs."

"It wasn't me," his sister replied. "It must have been a hologram of me. There weren't any battle dogs in my hologram."

"Mine was terrible," Zak muttered. "I tried to end the simulation, but it wouldn't respond. I wonder if that's another bug that needs to be worked out."

"Well, we've spent enough time here, in any event," Lando concluded. "Let's tour the rest of the park, shall we?"

They left The Nightmare Machine and walked out into the artificial light of Fun World.

"I'd like to visit the lagoon again," Tash suggested.

"All right," Zak agreed. "It's over here." He turned to his left.

"No it's not," Tash laughed. "It's over here." She pointed to the right. Between two buildings, they could just see a thin blue strip of water.

Zak shook his head. "That's funny, I could have sworn I saw it over on this side."

Deevee tilted his head understandingly. "The large number of holographic projections in this space could confuse a species. Unless, of course, one happens to be a droid of superior quality."

"Right, Deevee," Tash groaned. "Let's go."

But Zak wasn't listening. As he looked around to get his bearings, he caught a glimpse of something disturbingly familiar. A large, pale creature clung to the side of a wall, its double-jointed arms and legs twisted at bizarre angles. Zak saw the flashing blood-red eyes and an enormous head. But by the time he'd turned to look directly at the thing, it was gone.

"What's wrong?" Tash asked.

"Did you see that?"

She looked around. "See what?"

Zak didn't respond. The creature had been clinging to the outside wall of the Hall of Reflection. Zak thought he'd seen it slip inside.

"Zak?" Tash prompted him.

"I think I saw it," he replied. "The creature I saw in The Nightmare Machine."

Deevee heaved an electronic sigh. "Zak, we've been through this already. That was merely a hologram."

"Maybe. Maybe not," Zak said. He started toward the building.

He didn't have time to argue. By the time he convinced them to follow, the creature would be long gone.

Zak reached the steps of the Hall of Reflection. The building looked basically the same as it did yesterday, yet somehow different. It was darker and more shadowy. Zak did not pause to dwell on the change. He plunged into the mirror maze.

Inside, there was no sign of the brain creature. But Zak decided to keep looking.

He saw his own image reflected dozens of times. Just as before, the reflections were distorted, but now they were even more hideous. Zak wasn't just reflected as a silly-looking troll. Now he looked like a monster. With each twist and turn that took him deeper into the hall of mirrors, Zak's reflection became more hideous.

Finally, as he reached what he guessed was the center of the maze, Zak saw an image that made him gag. He was looking at his own face, but his skin had melted and hung from his cheeks in sagging clumps. His eyes had sunk back into their sockets so that they looked like holes in his skull. His arms had grown twice as long. His knuckles dragged on the floor. His elbows reached down to his knees, which were now jointed in the opposite direction so that they pointed backward instead of forward.

"*Agh!*" he cried. He reached out to touch the glass that held his distorted image. His reflection jiggled as it moved and reached forward in the same motion. As Zak touched the glass, his reflection touched the glass at exactly the same point, and the whole image shimmered into a blur.

When the mirror cleared again, Zak was looking at a perfect image of his true self. He saw his own messy brown hair and his own face. His reflection was grinning wickedly. That was odd, because Zak didn't think he was smiling.

He tried to raise one hand to touch his face, but his arm felt heavy and awkward. With some effort he managed to lift his

hand... only to find that it was as long and deformed as the horrible image he'd seen before.

He tried to step back from the mirror but stumbled. His own knees bent backward. Zak dragged his two clumsy hands up to his face, and felt the skin hanging limp and soft from his cheeks. He let out a wail. Zak had turned into a monster.

Chapter Eight

Zak tried to speak, but his words were garbled and lost in the folds of melted flesh around his lips.

"Zak?" Tash's voice drifted in from outside the Hall of Reflection. "Zak, are you in here?"

Trying to balance on his backward legs, Zak staggered through the maze. The mirrors reflected his own hideous form back at him.

"Zak!" Tash called again. "I'm coming in to look for you!"

"*No!*"> Zak thought. *If Tash comes in here she'll be changed, too.* Zak struggled to make his mouth work properly.

"Nnnaaa!" he bellowed. "Shtay bach!"

"Zak?" Tash's voice deepened with concern. "Is that you? You're scaring me!"

Zak could not stop slurring his words. "Don commm ind!"

He had to do something! Turning his head, Zak caught a glimpse of himself——his *real* self——in one of the mirrors.

"Gotja!" he mumbled. He reached out and touched the mirror. Just as before, the reflection shimmered. When it stopped, Zak looked down at his own hand. It looked normal.

"Zak!" Lando called out.

"I'm coming!" he replied in his own clear voice. "Don't touch the mirrors!"

Zak carefully wound his way back through the maze until he reached the exit where the others had stopped. "We're over here!" Tash called out. "What's going on?"

"M——My reflection!" he explained breathlessly. "The mirrors stole it. They changed me into a——a monster."

Lando raised an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

"Zak, are you sure?" his sister asked.

"It seems unlikely," Deevee pointed out. "Molecular alteration is an extremely complex process. It would take a computer the size of——"

"It happened," Zak replied. "I'm telling you, something is wrong here."

"Zak, how could it have changed you?" Tash said. "And how could you have changed back so quickly? Maybe you just looked at one of these crazy reflections." She reached out to one of the nearest funhouse mirrors.

"Don't touch it!" Zak yelled.

Lando frowned. "Zak, if you're that concerned, maybe we should go back to see Danna Fajji. I'm sure he can explain all this, just as he explained The Nightmare Machine."

"Oh, that makes me feel a lot better," Zak said sarcastically. But he had no better ideas, and he followed as Lando led them back toward the administrative building.

"Welcome!" Danna Fajji called out as they entered his office. He stood up from behind a curved metallic desk, where he'd been working at a computer. "I trust you found Hologram Fun World to your liking. How was The Nightmare Machine?"

"Confusing, to say the least," Lando began diplomatically. "In fact, you could say that——"

"What's going on?" Zak interrupted Lando. "First you scare me with those horror holos in The Nightmare Machine, and then something happened to me in the Hall of Reflection. What is this place?"

"The Hall of Reflection," Fajji muttered, putting his hands together and touching his fingertips to his puffy lips. "My

apologies. My hologram technicians have been experimenting with new programs. You may have discovered a glitch in the mirror room."

"A *glitch*!" Zak almost screamed.

"There, you see?" Deevee said, trying to calm Zak down. "The explanation is simple."

"I truly regret any inconvenience," Fajji insisted sincerely. "We take all complaints quite seriously, and I'll do anything I can to make your stay pleasant."

"Complaints?" Lando asked warily. "Have you gotten any other complaints? I hope they're not the kind that would concern a potential investor like me."

"Of course not! Of course not!" Fajji laughed. "In fact, I'm glad you're here, Master Calrissian. I wanted to show you some of these profit numbers..."

As Lando and Fajji drifted into conversation, Zak shook his head and turned away to look at the view from the window. Far off he could see the lagoon where the Whaladon swam. Closer up, Zak saw the Star Chamber, which contained a three-dimensional map of the entire galaxy. Almost beneath his feet, at the steps of the administration building, Zak could see a crowd of tourists walking across the plaza.

He wondered if he really had just been the victim of a computer glitch. No one else seemed to be concerned about Fun World. Certainly not the crowd below him. He squinted, trying to focus on the faces of the beings milling about the plaza.

As he did, the entire crowd vanished.

Chapter Nine

Zak was so startled that he didn't cry out. He blinked, thinking his eyes were playing tricks on him.

They weren't. The plaza beneath the administration building was empty. The crowds had vanished. "They're gone," he said in pure astonishment.

"They're all just gone."

"Who's gone?" Tash asked.

"Everyone!" he said, pointing out the window. Tash and Lando rushed to the window. As far as the eye could see, the streets were empty.

Hologram Fun World was deserted.

"See!" Zak insisted. "I told you something was going on here." He turned to Danna Fajji and demanded, "What happened to everyone?"

Fajji stammered, "Please——please, I assure you, no one has been harmed..."

Lando glowered. "Zak may be right about this place after all. I think you've got some explaining to do, Fajji."

The chubby man tugged at his red heard. "Master Calrissian, I'm afraid I do owe you an explanation." He sighed. "You see, business at Hologram Fun World has not been as good lately as it could be. We haven't had many visitors. And when the park is

so empty, the people that *do* come feel less excited about being here. So in order to make the park appear full, we——"

"You created holographic visitors," Tash guessed.

"Exactly," Fajji confessed. "We do have a few real visitors in Fun World, but most of the crowds you've seen today—— they're computer-generated images."

"I knew it," Deevee sniffed.

"Deevee, you *knew* that?" Tash started.

"Of course," the droid replied. "Any droid worth his circuitry would know the difference."

"But most species wouldn't," Fajji acknowledged.

"An investor certainly wouldn't," Lando said accusingly. "Fajji, why do I have the feeling you were trying to trick me into investing in your Fun World? "

"Master Calrissian, I——"

"Don't say another word!" Calrissian snorted indignantly. "I'll have to reconsider our arrangement and speak to you tomorrow. Good day!"

Calrissian stomped out of Fajji's office with the two Arrandas and their droid in tow. As all four descended in the turbolift, Lando surprised his friends when his angry glare turned into a pleasant chuckle.

"Wha——?" Zak sputtered. "You're not mad? That Fajji tried to trick you, and you're laughing?"

Lando's eyes flashed mischievously. "Just a businessman's trick. I would have done the same in his place. In fact, I admire Fajji's guts for trying to pull off the hologram trick."

"But you seemed so angry in there," Zak replied.

"Remember," Lando said in return, "things are not always what they seem. Let's go back to the lodge."

***

That night, Zak dreamed.

He dreamed that he was on Uncle Hoole's Shi'ido homeworld——a planet that, like Uncle Hoole himself, was a mystery. At first it was calm and beautiful, with clean, well tended streets and tall, elegant Shi'ido walking by. Zak felt peaceful and calm.

Then, in the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of a large head and flashing red eyes. Two long, multi-jointed arms wriggled through the air, reaching for him. But when Zak turned toward the image, the entire world melted and changed shape.

Suddenly he was surrounded by Imperial stormtroopers. When Zak turned to run, the world shape-shifted again, and Zak plunged into a thick bog. Swamp water rose up to his chest. As he struggled through it, Zak felt the thick tentacle of a one-eyed, water-dwelling dianoga brush past his arm.

But again his attention was caught by a movement just out of eyesight. This time Zak managed to glimpse a huge domed skull before his dream melted and changed. A whole series of nightmares blended together as Zak plunged into a pit of writhing, squirming crystal snakes.

Zak awoke suddenly. He felt the sheets crumpled around him, soaked with sweat.

Zak had had nightmares before, but never so many all at once, and never so many different kinds. It was almost as though his brain were sorting through a list of the most frightening scenes imaginable. And what was that *thing* that kept moving in the corner of his eye? He tried to recall the image exactly as it had appeared in his dream, but he couldn't.

"Just like a dream to do that," Zak muttered.

He got out of bed and went to his window. It was morning, but still too early for anyone to be awake. All the attractions of Hologram Fun World had been shut down, and the amusement park stretched before him like a vast pool of darkness.

Zak left his room and walked down the hall to Tash's. He was surprised that Deevee wasn't standing in the hall——the caretaker droid's usual post when the two Arrandas slept. He

rang Tash's door buzzer once. Then twice. On the third buzz, Zak thought he heard Tash call out from the other side of the door. He pressed the Open switch, and the door slid back.

Her room was dark, but Zak could see his sister's silhouette outlined against a view window. She was sitting on the edge of her bed, very still. Although he couldn't see her face in the dark room, he could tell she was looking at him.

"Tash," he said softly as the door slid closed behind him. "I couldn't sleep. Something about this place is still bothering me. Are you sure you aren't getting any of your... you know, your feelings? The Force, or whatever it is... isn't it telling you anything?"

His sister didn't reply.

"Tash?" he whispered. "C'mon. What's on your mind?"

Tash spoke in a slow, low voice.

"One of us must die."

Chapter Ten

"One of us must die."

Tash repeated the phrase, this time a little faster.

"Tash?" Zak replied, craning his neck forward to see her face. "What are you talking about?"

"One of us must die!" she hissed urgently.

Now that he was close enough, Zak could see that Tash's eyes were open, but her stare was blank. She was looking at him, but she seemed to see something else. It was as though she were in a deep trance.

Zak touched her shoulder, and before he could speak her name again, Tash shuddered and blinked rapidly. Her eyes closed, then opened again. This time she focused on her brother's face.

"Zak? What are you doing here?"

"What did you mean by 'one of us must die'?" he asked in return.

His sister rubbed the sleep from her eyes and brushed back a wisp of blond hair from her face. "What are you talking about?"

Zak explained how he had found Tash sitting on the edge of her bed, how she'd looked, and what she'd said.

"I don't remember saying that. I was dreaming something... but it's gone now. The next thing I knew, you were waking me up."

Zak told her about his own nightmares. "I just can't shake the feeling that something's wrong. Aren't you getting any of your feelings?"

Tash rubbed her forehead. "Nope. Just a headache. Sorry, Zak. Can't you try to relax? This is supposed to be our vacation. The whole point of coming to Hologram Fun World was to find a place far away from Project Starscream. Fun World may be weird, but there's nothing dangerous here."

Zak grimaced. "Don't tell me you believe what Fajji says."

Tash shrugged. "Why not? It fits, doesn't it? How could all those people vanish if they weren't holograms in the first place?"

They debated until a holographic sun rose across the artificial sky of Fun World, and Tash's door buzzer rang. Deevee entered a moment later.

"Good morning. Master Calrissian asked me to inform you both that he plans to continue to explore Fun World this morning. He's invited you both along."

Zak hesitated. He liked Lando, but he had misgivings about re-entering the park. "I don't know, Deevee..." he started to say.

The droid put his stiff mechanical arms on his hips. "Zak Arranda, your uncle gave me the responsibility to make sure you and your sister relaxed while at Hologram Fun World. I will not have you sulking in your room while a galaxy full of perfectly safe adventures awaits." Deevee's eyelike photoreceptors glowed at them as he waited.

Tash stood up and yawned. "C'mon, Zak. There's nothing to worry about. Let's go."

Zak found himself in a very strange position. Normally he was willing to take a chance. But even the bravest adventurer would have second thoughts after seeing himself turned into a monster in the Hall of Reflection.

Or had he?

It *could* have been a hologram, Zak told himself.

After all, that's what holograms were for——to fool people. Maybe that's all that had happened.

Besides, Zak thought, *even Deevee is encouraging me to enjoy Fun World.* Their bionic baby-sitter was normally so cautious that Zak sometimes thought he'd been programmed by a nursemaid. If he caught even a hint of danger, Deevee would have them on the next shuttle to the safest star system in a thousand light-years. Yet the droid did not fear Fun World.

"Maybe you're right," he said at last. "Let's go."

***

Hologram Fun World was brimming with tourists——real or holograms, Zak couldn't tell——as the Arrandas followed Deevee to their meeting place with Lando Calrissian. Lando was waiting for them in the plaza near the administration building. He looked handsome in a flowing scarlet cape that fastened around his neck with a golden cord.

"And how did you two sleep?" he asked as they approached. His sparkling eyes fell on Tash. "Are you all right? You look a bit pale."

"I've got a little headache," she said quietly. "Nothing to worry about."

Zak said, "I can't believe you're still considering getting involved in this place after everything that's gone wrong."

The gambler shrugged. "There's nothing wrong with this operation that a smooth hand couldn't fix. But I think I'll drop this 'horror' theme down a black hole. Doesn't seem to do much for the park."

A pair of Bothans happened to be walking by at that moment. "Excuse me," Zak said, stepping in front of the white-furred humanoids.

"May I be of service?" one of the Bothans asked, smoothing a tuft of hair on his cheek.

"Yes," Zak replied with just a hint of mischief, "I was just wondering. How does it feel to be an illusion?"

The Bothan's fur stiffened. "I beg your pard——"

It never finished. A powerful roar swept across the plaza like a storm, echoed by the thunder of giant footsteps crashing down on the ground.

The rancor had come back.

Screeching, the Bothans bolted for the nearest building. They dove into the administration building, and the doors slammed shut behind them.

Zak laughed. "That's prime! Those Bothans are going to feel like fools when they learn that the rancor is just a hologram."

Tash only shrugged. "Can't blame them. We did the same thing when we got here."

As they spoke, the huge rancor continued to charge forward. Now it was ten meters away, its head lowered, its jaws open wide to swallow them.

They ignored it. "If you don't mind," Lando said casually, raising his voice to be heard over the artificial roar of the rancor, "I'd like to get your opinions on some of the other attractions. Then I'll make my final decision about Fun World."

"No problem!" Zak shouted back. "Let's just wait for this pest to pass."

"You know, an old friend once dared me to look a rancor in the eye," Lando said with a chuckle, "and I never back down from a dare." He turned and shouted right into the rancor's face. "Get outta here, meat breath! Your program couldn't fool a greenie from Circarpous IV!"

The rancor responded with lightning speed. Its massive head shot forward and its jaws snapped shut around Lando Calrissian.

Chapter Eleven

"Lando!" Zak cried, jumping back.

"What happened?" Tash shouted, although she and Zak both knew very well what had happened. They had both seen Lando Calrissian swallowed whole by a rancor that was *supposed* to be nothing more than an illusion.

The rancor let loose a bone-chilling roar that shook the Fun World dome. Clots of gooey red gore spilled from its open jaws.

"Run!" Deevee shrieked frantically as the rancor's tiny eyes settled on the three remaining portions of its meal.

Zak, Tash, and the droid scrambled toward the doors to the administration building, but the portal refused to slide open.

"It's locked!" Tash cried.

"The Bothans must have locked it!" Zak guessed, pounding on the door. "Let us in!"

There was no reply, except for another triumphant roar from the rancor.

Deevee's caretaker programming took charge. "This way!" the droid ordered.

The two Arrandas followed Deevee as the droid churned his mechanical legs as fast as they would go across the plaza. The rancor hesitated a moment. Then it turned and thundered after them.

The beast had cleared the streets of real and holographic tourists alike. Zak, Tash, and Deevee were alone now as they ran from the rancor. Zak veered away and pounded on the door to the nearby Volcano Slide. That, too, was locked.

"What's going on here?" he panted, and continued running.

The rancor was gaining on them.

"Follow me," Deevee encouraged.

"Wh——Where?" Tash managed to gasp as they ran down one of Fun World's many lanes.

"To the lagoon," Deevee suggested. "The rancor will not like the water."

If the path to the lagoon had been straight, Zak and Tash would have been swallowed by the rancor's next bite. Deevee would have been crushed into scrap metal by the carnivorous beast's next footstep.

But the path wasn't straight. Zak, Tash, and Deevee made a sharp turn to the left just as the rancor pounced. Unable to turn as fast as its tiny prey, the giant predator skidded and crashed into a building, toppling a wall.

"Hurry! This is our chance!" Deevee urged.

Zak was usually faster than Tash, and much faster than the stiff-legged droid. So he was surprised to see Deevee keep ahead of him as they ran. When had the droid gotten so fast?

The persistent rancor had recovered from his crash and was gaining once again. But by now they had reached the lagoon. All three kicked up white sand as they dashed across the beach and splashed into the water.

"Get beyond its reach!" Deevee cried.

Tash and Zak waded out until the water was almost to their necks. They were a dozen meters from shore——much farther than the rancor could extend its massive claws.

The rancor rumbled across the beach, sending huge sand clouds billowing into the artificial sky. The minute its foot touched the wet sand at the water's edge, the creature stopped.

Tash rubbed water from her eyes with trembling hands. "Are you sure this will work?"

"Yes," Deevee replied as water droplets ran down his metal plating. "According to my information banks, rancors have an innate dislike for water."

The rancor growled, raised a foot, and took one mighty stomp into the ocean.

"Of course," the droid added, "I could be mistaken."

The rancor took another step. The weight of its body sent a huge wave rolling out from the shore toward them. The wave carried them farther out into the ocean.

"Great," Zak muttered. "We're still being chased, but now we can't even run."

"We may not have to worry about the rancor," Tash said gloomily. "We're being carried out to sea."

She was right. The rancor was so big that every step it took caused a huge wave. Each wave pushed the two Arrandas and the droid farther away from shore. After a few moments, Zak felt the silty floor drop away beneath his feet and he began to tread water.

Zak accidentally swallowed a mouthful of saltwater. He gagged and shouted, "How long can you stay afloat?"

"Awhile," Tash said shakily. "But my head is killing me. I don't feel well."

"I am equipped with internal air pockets," Deevee informed Zak. "I can remain buoyant for extended periods. But my circuits will short out rather quickly in this water, I'm afraid."

"I don't think we'll be around that long," Zak groaned, pointing toward shore.

The rancor came nearer. The water had risen above its snarling jaws now, making Zak realize just how far from shore they were. All they could see were two beady black eyes and a bony ridge atop its head as it waded toward its prey.

Then it sank below the surface.

"Where is it?" Zak called out, thrashing around in the water.

"Astounding," Deevee said, weirdly calm. "It's going to strike from below."

Zak thought he felt a cold current of water rush beneath his feet, as though something large had passed through the water beneath him. He looked around frantically.

Farther out on the ocean, bubbles rose to the surface. Something was out there.

"Could it have passed us?" Tash wondered aloud.

No one had time to answer. More air bubbles burst through the surface, and then a huge gray shape rose into the air, shedding an enormous tent of water. The gray shape was at least twenty meters off, but still it loomed over the two Arrandas and their droid. Zak saw one enormous blue eye focus on him.

"The Whaladon!"

"It will give us a ride," Deevee stated.

"No kidding!" shouted Zak.

Zak began to swim, then stopped. Something else had appeared near the Whaladon. He thought he saw two flashing red eyes just beneath the water's surface. Then the salt spray made him blink, and the image was gone.

The Whaladon, meanwhile, loomed closer.

The Arrandas had ridden the Whaladon two days ago by swimming out into the lagoon, where the sea creature patiently waited as they scrambled onto its back.

This time the Whaladon did not seem to be waiting. With a swipe of its massive tail, the giant fish shot forward——straight toward them.

Tash stopped swimming. "What's it doing?"

A line formed along the Whaladon's jaw. The line turned into an opening, and the opening grew into a gargantuan gaping mouth. The lower part of the jaw was filled with churning ocean water. The top of the jaw——ten meters above the water's surface——reached toward the sky.

"Look out!" Zak cried. But it was too late.

They were swept into the giant mouth just as the jaws snapped shut.

The Whaladon had swallowed them whole.

Chapter Twelve

Zak felt only water and darkness and heat and noise. For a moment he thought he had died. But when the rumbling did not stop, and the heat continued to press down on him like an enormous wet cloak, he knew that he was still alive.

Inside the Whaladon.

Zak was lying on something moist but solid, squishy but immensely strong. The spongy surface twitched, and Zak bounced into the hot, dark air, then landed with a wet splat.

*I'm lying on the Whaladon's tongue,*he thought. A chill of disgust ran through him.

A tiny noise reached his ears over the sounds of the Whaladon's body. He heard it again——"Zak!"——and squirmed toward the sound.

"Here!" he called into the pitch darkness.

A hand reached out and grabbed the collar of his tunic, pulling him easily along the Whaladon's slick tongue until he felt himself lying next to his sister. She was clinging to something hard and rough and pointed.

"Are you all right?" Tash shouted.

"I don't know," Zak said. "Deevee?"

"Here." Two dim round lights presented themselves. They were the glow from Deevee's photoreceptors. "We are inside the Whaladon's mouth."

Beneath them, the Whaladon's tongue surged and curled back away from the teeth. "Hold on!" Deevee said.

Zak felt a powerful force drag him backward, toward the creature's throat and stomach. He grabbed on to one of the Whaladon's teeth so hard that he felt his fingernails scrape its sides. Just as Zak felt he could hold on no longer, the tongue rolled back toward them, and Zak collapsed against the sea monster's gums.

"Hold tight," Deevee's voice warned from the darkness. "The Whaladon is sure to swallow again soon."

"I can't stand it!" Tash shouted. There was panic in her voice, the same terror Zak felt swelling in his own chest. "Why didn't it just swallow us and finish this?"

"Tash!" Zak yelled. "Don't give up! We've got to find a way out of here!"

"Why?" she said in despair. "What's the use? Things will only get worse."

Zak was worried. It wasn't like Tash to give up. Despite the thick heat, the darkness, and the droning sound of the Whaladon's body and lungs, Zak tried to calm his own fear and think clearly.

"Don't think that way, Tash," he began. "You can't."

"What difference does it make?" she said weakly.

"It makes a difference to me!" he argued. "C'mon, Tash! You're all I have left. And I'm all you have left. We've always helped one another. You can't quit now!"

"Watch out!" Deevee called.

Once again, the massive tongue rolled back. Zak hugged the hard, slippery tooth to keep from being pulled down the monster's throat. Beside him he heard Tash sob. Then she cried out. Then she was gone.

"Tash!" Zak yelled. "Are you there?"

No answer.

"Tash!"

Under the roar of the Whaladon's noisy innards, Zak heard a faint moan. Tash had lost her grip on the Whaladon tooth and was lying somewhere on the monster's huge tongue. When the Whaladon swallowed again, she would be lost forever.

Zak did not want to give up his secure hold. But he did not want to lose his sister either. Releasing his grip, Zak let himself slide blindly back along the giant, wriggling tongue. He thrashed his arms about until one hand brushed along Tash's jacket, and he grabbed hold. Tash let out a short cry as they both slid another meter, then stopped.

"Come on!" he ordered. He got to his knees and, still holding Tash's jacket, pulled her back toward what he thought was the front of the Whaladon's mouth. Finally his free hand touched something hard, and he clung to the Whaladon's tooth.

"Now," he gasped, "we've got to get out of here."

"I believe I can help."

As Zak and Tash turned toward Deevee's voice, the droid was suddenly illuminated by the glow of a small laser torch. Its orange light reflected off the water drops dripping down Deevee's wet metallic body.

"Where did you get that?" Zak asked.

"I equipped myself with a laser torch recently to effect personal repairs," the droid replied. "It seems to have been a fortunate addition."

"Why didn't you tell us before?" Tash snapped.

Deevee explained, "It would not have done any good. The Whaladon had submerged. We would have escaped its mouth only to drown in deep water. But my sensors tell me the creature has surfaced again. Brace yourselves."

In the light of the torch, Zak and Tash watched Deevee aim the cutting tool toward the roof of the Whaladon's cavernous mouth and press the trigger. A thin beam of superheated energy

shot through the murky air and punctured the top of the creature's mouth.

A deep, roaring sound of distress rolled through the cavern. The tongue slapped upward, nearly tearing Tash and Zak from their perch, then slammed downward onto the base of the giant mouth. Warm, slimy saliva splashed over their bodies.

The Whaladon bellowed.

Deevee fired again, and the creature shook once more. This time, it let out a low-pitched moan and opened its wounded mouth. Sunlight and saltwater sprayed into the cavern in a rush of wind. Over the white foam, Zak saw the clear blue waters of the holographic ocean.

"Jump to the side!" Deevee yelled.

Zak and Tash pulled themselves atop the massive tooth and jumped into the water to one side of the Whaladon. Deevee jumped to the other side just as the mighty jaws closed again.

The roar of rushing water filled Zak's ears, and the cold sea covered him. Holding his breath, he tumbled underwater for a few panicked seconds in the Whaladon's wake, not knowing which way was up or down. He tried to calm himself, and relaxed, knowing that gravity would tell him where to go. His lungs started to burn from lack of oxygen. After a moment, he felt himself bob upward, and he kicked in that direction.

Zak's head broke the surface and he gasped, filling his lungs with air. He wiped saltwater from his eyes. He floated on the ocean's surface, bobbing wildly in the wake of the sea monster. In moments, the fast-moving Whaladon was little more than a gray lump on the horizon.

"Tash! Deevee!" he called out. No one replied, but Zak saw a patch of blondish hair fly up over the swelling water and he swam for it. He reached his sister, who gasped and coughed out saltwater. Her eyes were half-open but dazed.

There was no sign of Deevee.

He can't drown, Zak thought to himself. *Maybe he got pulled along by the current.*

Tash would soon sink if she didn't snap out of it. Using one hand to keep her afloat, Zak started to swim toward the shore.

Zak had done plenty of swimming on Alderaan. He swam steadily but slowly, to save his strength, and after fifteen minutes they were near enough to see the shoreline clearly. There was no sign of the rancor.

Exhausted and soaking wet, Zak crawled onto the wet sand, hauling his sister behind him. "I've never swum so far in my whole life," he panted.

Beside him Tash let out a huge gasp. Still only half-conscious, she muttered, "One of us must die. One of us must die..."

Zak grabbed her shoulders. "Tash? What are you saying?"

Tash let out a sudden, violent cough, clearing more water from her lungs. Her eyes flew open. "Zak!" She looked around. "We're——we're on dry land!"

"Yeah," he sighed wearily. "What were you saying just now? You were muttering again. Are you sick?"

"I don't know." She rubbed her temples. "I don't remember saying anything. But my head is killing me. What did I say?"

Zak decided not to tell her. "Forget it. You were just delirious."

Tash shivered in her wet clothes.

"We've got to find help," Zak said. "We've got to find out what's going on here. How could that rancor have *eaten* Lando? Wasn't it a hologram?"

Tash didn't answer. She still seemed lost in her own world.

Zak answered his own question. "I don't know. I told you something's wrong here. It's like the Hall of Reflection. I really felt like I had been transformed, not just tricked by an illusion." He pointed to the nearest building, a long, low structure at the edge of the lagoon. "Whatever that rancor is, I don't want it to find us. Let's stay out of the open. We should head for that building over there."

Slowly Tash and Zak made their way toward a building surrounded by small kiosks. The kiosks contained arts and crafts

from across the galaxy——woven baskets spun from the grass fields of Worru'du, magnificent animated storytelling puppets from the planet Zhann, and delicate figurines made from seashells on the many-tiered world of K'ath.

The objects in the kiosks were beautiful, but all Zak and Tash noticed was that all the people were gone.

"Maybe they were all holograms," Tash offered hopefully. "Maybe they were just accidentally erased, like the other day."

"Or maybe," Zak returned darkly, "they were real. Maybe everything is real now. Otherwise how could that rancor have eaten Lando?" He swallowed. "Everything in Fun World has come to life."

The building beyond the kiosks was topped by a sign that read,

THE MAKER'S WORKSHOP.

"Do you think this place is safe?" Tash asked.

"I don't know," her brother answered. "But it can't be worse than anyplace else in Fun World. Besides, maybe we'll find Deevee here. It sounds like the kind of place a droid would like."

Inside The Maker's Workshop, they found a long hall. On each side of the hall was a workbench, and another long table ran down the middle of the room.

"Prime!" Zak exclaimed when he saw the tables.

The tables, shelves, and even parts of the floor were covered with mechanical parts and tools. Servos, circuits, hydrospanners, the arms and legs and heads of disassembled droids, even engine parts, lay scattered everywhere. It was a tinkerer's paradise.

"Imagine what I could do with all this stuff," he murmured to himself. He walked down one row of parts. "There's enough spare equipment in this room to build a dozen droids, a T-71 skyhopper——maybe even a small starship!"

"Don't get any ideas, Zak," Tash warned. "This isn't the time to——"

She stopped. In the middle of the central table, resting on a small pedestal of polished stone, was a gleaming cylinder that Tash recognized instantly. It was the weapon of a Jedi Knight.

It was a lightsaber.

Tash had only seen one lightsaber before with her own eyes. It had been worn on the hip of a young man named Luke Skywalker who, along with his friends, had saved them from the flesh-eating planet D'vouran.

Tash exhaled slowly. A lightsaber. Only the Jedi knew how to build them. Only the Jedi knew how to use them properly. Where had it come from? How had it gotten here?

It's probably just a hologram, she thought. But then, the rancor was supposed to be a hologram, wasn't it? Maybe the lightsaber would prove to be just as real.

With a lightsaber, Tash felt she would be one step closer to becoming a Jedi Knight. With one of those powerful laser swords in her hand, there was nothing she couldn't do. She could be a hero.

Nearby, Zak stood before a table full of droid parts, his eyes jumping from one piece to another. In his mind he had already designed his own hyperdrive, built a personal droid with antigravity repulsors and long-range sensors for detecting angry adults, and a streamlined skimboard that could go vertical and climb the sides of even the highest buildings.

But Zak found the biggest prize of all a few meters down the line. Sitting under a bright light was a droid head, but not just any droid head.

"A BT-2000," Zak whistled under his breath. "That's the most advanced droidwork in the galaxy. The computer brain in that droid could run all the functions on a Star Destroyer. I'd love to see what makes it tick."

Zak reached out his hands and picked up the droid head.

Tash reached out and picked up the lightsaber.

Before Zak, the droid's photoreceptors blazed with light. The head swiveled in his hands, and a booming voice exploded from the mouthspeaker.

"WHO DISTURBS THE MAKER'S SLEEP?"

Zak stumbled hack in shock, dropping the head. Startled by her brother, Tash instinctively pressed the lightsaber's activation switch. It burst into fire and light.

The droid's burning eyes continued to glare at Zak.

"THE CRAFT OF THE MAKER IS FORBIDDEN TO THE LIVING! INTRUDERS, PREPARE TO MEET YOUR DOOM!"

The light in the droid's eyes faded. For a moment, the room was silent except for the hiss of the lightsaber in Tash's hand.

Then every object in the workshop came to life. Gears whirred and gyros spun as dozens of machines turned to face Zak.

Then they attacked.

Chapter Thirteen

The Maker's Workshop had turned into a hurricane of flying metal parts and electronic wires. Cogwheels collided with hydropistons; mechanical arms attached themselves to wheels. Zak saw two droid arms without bodies fuse themselves to a pair of tractor treads and start rolling toward Zak and Tash.

"This is impossible," he said out loud. "Impossible!"

*Gadgets could not put themselves together!*he wanted to shout. *Machines did not turn themselves on. Technology would not turn on living beings!*

He jumped out of the way as the mechanical droid arms clutched at him. But dodging the arms only put him within reach of a hydrospanner that had come to life and was boring its way toward his forehead. He ducked, and the hydrospanner buried itself in the wall.

All around him, ragtag pieces of metal, odds and ends of junk, were combining to form misshapen mechanical monsters with wires for hair, glow rods for eyes, and multiple arms made of whatever material lay at hand.

"This can't be happening!" Zak shouted.

"But it is," said a gravelly voice. Zak saw the droid head still resting on the table. Its eyes were once more lit up and glaring at Zak. "You are the little tinkerer," the droid spoke. "You like to

experiment with technology. You like to take things apart. How do you feel now that technology is going to take *you* apart? Destroy him!"

Zak was so terrified he couldn't move. This was worse than a nightmare——it was a fear that he did not even know he had, something buried deep in his brain. He was terrified, and he could only think of one thing. Where was Tash?

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Tash was paralyzed, too. She saw the mechanical junk come to life. She heard the droid head threaten Zak. She felt the lightsaber quivering in her hand, waiting to be used. But she couldn't move.

Here was her chance to prove her Jedi potential. All she had to do was charge into the crowd of whirling machines and robots, cutting through them with her unstoppable lightsaber. She could save her brother using a Jedi weapon. She could *be* a Jedi.

But what if I fail?

The thought froze her muscles. What if she found out, after all this time, that she really didn't have the Force? That she couldn't use a lightsaber? That all her hopes and dreams were just a fantasy?

She was terrified.

"Tash! Help!" Zak called. The machines were closing in. Most had attached tools to the ends of their mechanical arms. As they came closer, needles, blades, and saws began to whir.

"Tash!" Zak repeated. His back was to the wall. He was trapped. "Use the lightsaber!"

Tash could not do it. She wanted to be a Jedi Knight more than anything else in the galaxy. But she was afraid to fail.

"I'm——I'm sorry, Zak," she whispered.

She deactivated the lightsaber and dropped it to the floor.

"Tash!" Zak groaned.

But to the surprise of both Arrandas, the moment Tash shut down the energy blade, all the machines stopped. They fell apart in cascades of metal scraps. In seconds, the floor was once more littered with lifeless junk.

Zak gaped at the semicircle of harmless scrap at his feet. "How did you do that?" he asked.

"I didn't do anything," his sister said, nearly in tears.

Zak didn't waste any time. "Well, whatever. It worked. Let's get out of here."

They hurried out of The Maker's Workshop and into the empty streets of Hologram Fun World. There was still no one in sight.

"Maybe we should get out of here," Zak suggested. "We should find Deevee. Find someplace where the holograms aren't working."

"You're the technobrain," his sister replied wearily. "Where would that be?"

Zak considered. "The airlock. We didn't see any holograms until we left the airlock. Let's go."

They hurried in the direction of the space dock and its airlock. Now and then they heard the rancor roar down some distant street. Each time, they froze in their tracks and waited until its ground-shaking footsteps faded away.

Tash had been silent. Zak looked over at her. She was muttering something under her breath.

"... one of us must die... one of us must die..." she breathed.

"Tash!" Zak yelled. He shook her shoulders. "Quit it! What does that mean?"

Tash blinked and her eyes focused on him. "Wh——What?"

"You said it again. 'One of us must die.' What does that mean?"

His sister shook her head. "I'm sorry, Zak. I don't know. I don't even know I'm doing it. It must be important, but I just don't know."

"All right, just forget it. Look, here's the airlock."

They had arrived at a heavy steel portal set in the massive dome. Beyond the door was a room that led to another door. And that door led to the space dock.

"We'll just wait in the airlock for now, until we can figure out what to do. The holograms won't work there," said Zak.

"Okay," Tash said, reaching to press the switch that activated the automatic door.

Zak was distracted by a movement in the other direction. Four spidery limbs crawled into his line of sight. This time he whipped his head around and caught full sight of the brain creature. Its long arms and legs clung to the side of the space dome as its enormous head bobbed back and forth, red eyes burning bright. Two flailing tentacles flapped out of its open mouth. It looked bigger.

"Tash, wait!" Zak warned.

Too late. The door opened. For a fraction of a second, Zak and Tash were able to look out the door——a door that opened into the icy——cold vacuum of space. Then Tash was sucked out into the void.

Chapter Fourteen

Zak just barely managed to grab Tash's arm before she was pulled into deep space. Air from inside the dome began rushing out into empty space, dragging Tash and Zak along with it. Zak held Tash with one hand and clung to the edge of the doorway with the other. He had seen deep space and stars before, of course, but always from the safety of a starship viewport. Now he was looking at the eternal night with his naked eye. He didn't like it.

"Pull me back!" Tash gasped over the rushing wind.

"I can't!" he said, gritting his teeth. "Pull yourself!" Tash tried to use Zak's arm as a rope to pull herself back into Fun World. But the escaping air dragged at her face and clothes.

"I can't!" she yelled.

"You have to!" Zak demanded. He had already lost his parents and friends. His uncle was away, and now even Deevee was gone. He could not lose his only sister, the only *family* he had left. "Try!"

Tash gritted her teeth. Hand over hand, she pulled herself to safety. Centimeter by centimeter, she fought the wind that sucked her into space, until she was back inside the dome. Zak slapped the Close switch. The minute the heavy door slid back

into place, the powerful suction force stopped, and Tash collapsed to the ground.

For a moment the two Arrandas lay next to each other, gasping for breath.

"Wh——What is this place?" Tash nearly sobbed. "It's like a giant death trap."

"I don't know," Zak panted. "Everything's wrong here. I don't know why this is happening."

"I do."

Standing before them was Uncle Hoole! Both Arrandas got to their feet and threw their arms around him with relief. Hoole returned their hugs awkwardly. The stern expression never left his face.

"Uncle Hoole, we've got to get out of here," Zak explained in one hurried breath. "The holograms are alive and they're killing people. They killed Lando, a gambler we met, and Deevee's missing. And The Nightmare Machine creature is lurking about, I don't know what it is, but we've got to——"

"Remain calm," Hoole said steadily. "I have already discovered the cause of the occurrences. I assure you, everything is under control. Now follow me."

Zak and Tash were so relieved to see their uncle, so calm and in control, that they followed him willingly. This time when Zak spied a movement out of the corner of his eye, he ignored it. Whatever the creature from The Nightmare Machine was, Hoole would deal with it.

But the Shi'ido led them straight to the administration building at the heart of Hologram Fun World.

"Wait!" Zak almost shouted. "We can't go back there!"

Hoole didn't even pause. "The answers to your questions are within."

Tash and Zak looked at one another. They had no choice but to follow their uncle.

Like the rest of Fun World, the administration building seemed deserted. The silence made Zak even more nervous.

Alone, the three rode a turbolift to the top of the building and entered Danna Fajji's office. The baron administrator sat at his desk with his hands folded neatly in his lap.

"Welcome, welcome," Fajji said. "I understand you've had quite a day here at Hologram Fun World."

"Quite a day!" Tash snapped. "Your holograms killed our friend! They almost killed us!"

Fajji chuckled. "Oh, no, no, no. I assure you no one has been killed. At least, not yet."

With startling quickness, the smile fell away from Fajji's face.

Then Fajji's face itself fell away.

The baron administrator's skin crawled across his frame, and in two blinks of an eye he had changed shape.

Tash and Zak were looking at another Shi'ido.

"Gog!" Zak cried. But the presence of the evil scientist was not nearly as terrifying as what happened next. Gog turned to Uncle Hoole and nodded satisfactorily. "Excellent work, Dr. Hoole."

Hoole shrugged. "It was quite simple. They are trusting."

"You can't be working with him!" Tash insisted in a panic. "He's your enemy."

"He's *your* enemy," Hoole replied. "Gog and I have been working together since the beginning of Project Starscream."

Zak shook his head. "It can't be true!"

"It is," Gog said. "And now we'll prove it. Hoole, destroy these two interlopers."

A blaster appeared in Uncle Hoole's hand. He put it right between Zak's eyes.

Chapter Fifteen

Zak felt the cold metal of the blaster press against his forehead and braced himself for the shot.

Hoole did not fire right away. He waited, prolonging the moment of terror with an evil laugh. A quiver of terror ran through Zak like a groundquake, and he hugged himself to keep still.

His hand brushed against something hard in the pocket of his tunic.

He felt the square shape of the sabacc card shuffler and pulled it out.

"Enough torment, Hoole," Gog said. "End this once and for all."

Hoole nodded and began to squeeze the trigger. But before he did, Zak shoved the sabacc shuffler in Hoole's face and squeezed. The sabacc cards rattled and flew out of the shuffler chute. A deck full of hard plastic wafers slapped Hoole in the face. The Shi'ido grunted and reeled backward, waving his free hand before him to clear his sight.

"Run!" Zak yelled.

Tash was already ahead of him, racing for the turbo-lift. Zak slipped into the lift just as the doors closed.

"Everything's gone crazy! Everything!" he shouted at the walls.

Tash's only answer was a violent shudder and a whisper: "One of us must die."

The lift doors opened and they ran for the exit. As they reached it, they heard another turbolift open, and a blaster shot burned a hole in the wall to their left. Hoole was chasing them.

They were running through a horror-filled amusement park, being chased by their own uncle, who was working for the galaxy's most evil scientist. Zak realized that Tash might be right——they might not get out of Fun World alive.

A blaster bolt passed so close to Zak, he heard it burn the air around his ear.

"In here!" he panted, and ducked into the nearest doorway.

He stumbled forward and found himself floating in deep space.

This time, however, it was not the lifeless cold of real space. Zak was standing in the cavernous Star Chamber, which he and Tash had visited on their first day in Hologram Fun World. Stars and planets whirled past his head.

"Zak? You okay?" Tash said weakly. He saw her in the light of a passing sun, nine planets spinning around it.

"I feel like you sound," he answered.

"I'm miserable," she replied. "This is worse than anything, Zak. I thought it hurt when Mom and Dad died, but this..." she choked on the rest of her words. "And I failed. I could have saved you from those machines. I could have used the lightsaber. But I blew it. I want to be a Jedi so badly, but I was always afraid to fail..."

"You didn't blow it, Tash," Zak said. "I think you saved us by dropping the lightsaber. It didn't matter that you were afraid."

Something about his own words pricked Zak's memory, but before he could follow the thought, a new solar system came rushing through the void at them.

"Zak!" Tash started. "Do you know what system that is?"

"You're the one who does all the studying."

"It's Alderaan!"

She was right. He recognized the planets of the Alderaan system——including the hologram of their own blue-green planet. The system swept toward them and then slowed down, hovering a few meters away.

Zak swallowed. "I never thought I'd see home again, even in a hologram."

Then a single sphere appeared in the darkness. It was silver, and cold, and as it approached, they saw the thousands of laser towers on its surface. The approaching globe was pocked by one single indentation, like an eye, that slowly rotated toward the planet Alderaan.

It was the Death Star.

"No!" Zak and Tash yelled together.

The Death Star's eye began to glow as the massive battle station powered up its superlaser. There was a blinding flash. A powerful energy beam streaked through the holographic darkness and punctured Alderaan. A second later, nothing remained of the planet but a cloud of debris spreading out through space.

Tash and Zak's despair turned to fear when the Death Star rotated to face them.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Zak warned, backpedaling away. "Where's the door?"

Tash scanned the room, but saw only the whirling planets of the galaxy. "I don't see it."

"Here!" a voice called out.

Tash and Zak recognized the sound immediately. "Deevee!"

"Over here!" the droid called again.

They ran toward the sound, dodging in and out of a dozen star systems, running from one end of the galaxy to the other, outrunning even the holographic Death Star.

Deevee stood in a square of light framed by the doorway, holding out one beckoning hand. Sprinting past him, they burst out of the galaxy and back into Fun World.

"Thank goodness I found you!" Deevee started. "I've been all over this holographic madhouse——"

"Never mind that!" Zak snapped. "We need a place to hide. This entire place is a killing machine. And I think Uncle Hoole is involved."

The droid's circuits whirred. "Master Hoole? You must be mistaken——"

His sentence was cut off by a blaster bolt that sizzled through the space between the droid and the boy. Hoole had found them.

"This way!" the droid said. "I know where we can hide."

Zak and Tash followed their caretaker droid, who hurried down a few twisting, turning lanes past the Volcano Slide and the Hall of Reflection.

Although Hoole was out of sight in a few moments, Deevee kept up the pace. Tash, however, could go no farther. "My head——I have to rest," she said. She staggered over to a small stone bench and sat down.

"We can't stop!" Deevee cried.

"No," Zak replied. "We can't go any farther now anyway."

"It's not safe here!" Deevee nearly screeched.

"It's too much, Deevee," Tash gasped, trying to clear her head. "Everything that's happened. It's like our worst nightmares come true."

His sister's words struck Zak like a blow to the head. *It's like our worst nightmares come true.*

"Tash, that's it!"

Everything came into focus like a steamed mirror suddenly clearing. "That's why we keep stumbling across all these terrible scenes. That's how the rancor killed Lando. And why I was attacked by technology. And why you blew your chance to be a Jedi."

Tash didn't understand. "Zak, what are you——"

Zak interrupted his sister. "Yes! That's why Uncle Hoole betrayed us—— because you and I have both been afraid that the one adult willing to take us in might turn out to be evil. And

we were both forced to confront our worst fear——the destruction of Alderaan!" He looked at his sister. "We've gone through our worst nightmares because it's part of the program.

"We're still inside The Nightmare Machine!"

Chapter Sixteen

"Nonsense," Deevee said flatly.

Tash blinked. "We left The Nightmare Machine, remember, Zak? We haven't been inside it since yesterday."

"Exactly," the droid added.

"Exactly *wrong*," Zak almost shouted. "We never left. Everything that has happened since then has happened inside The Nightmare Machine. Remember that creature I saw the first time I went in? It's the same one I've been seeing ever since. Fajji said that the program read people's minds to discover their fears. But Deevee said that no machine could read minds——only certain living beings."

Deevee admitted, "Actually, Zak, on further consideration, I think I may have erred. It might be possible——"

"Besides," Tash interjected, "Fajji said they'd invented new technology."

"He was lying!" her brother insisted. "That brain creature must read minds and create the illusions. I really did see it. And we both just saw Gog. If Gog's here now, that means he could have been here before——and I could have actually seen him experimenting on those two kids! We're in big trouble here!"

He leaped to his feet. "We've got to get back to The Nightmare Machine. That's the only way out."

"That wouldn't be wise," Deevee quickly countered. "We should stay here."

Zak furrowed his brow. "A minute ago you wanted us to find a hiding place. Now you want us to stay here?"

To Tash, Zak's argument sounded unbelievable. She was willing to believe that hidden machines created the illusion of a rancor or another person next to her——but what machine could make her think an entire space station like Fun World was real, and keep up the illusion for two days? "Zak, if Gog were behind this, why wouldn't he have just killed us? He's had the chance."

"I don't know," her brother said. "Maybe he's testing out The Nightmare Machine creature. Think about it. It's the *fear* we were put through, never the real danger. Every time we were about to actually get killed, we were saved by——" Zak stopped cold. He looked at Deevee. "We were saved by you."

The droid stiffened indignantly. "I was merely doing my duty."

Zak did not respond at first. He could not. He remembered how fast Deevee had run from the rancor. How Deevee had suddenly produced a laser torch to open the Whaladon's mouth. How Deevee had appeared just as the Death Star was about to disintegrate them.

"You've been reacting to the holograms," Zak said, his voice barely above a whisper.

"What?" Tash asked.

"Deevee's been reacting to the holograms. The rancor. The Whaladon. The Death Star. He's been treating them like they're real. But he said he couldn't do that, remember?"

The droid huffed. "Zak Arranda, I was merely doing my duty as your caretaker, as I have in the past."

"If your opponent's acting normal under unusual circumstances, you can bet he's bluffing," Zak recited Lando's lesson.

He looked at his sister. "Tash. Deevee is a hologram, too."

As the words left Zak's mouth, Deevee emitted a roar of supreme rage. His body began to change. Small hatches opened up in his metal plating, producing laser weapons and vibroblades. His face changed into a gruesome metallic war mask.

Deevee had transformed into a battle droid.

Zak stumbled backward and tripped over the stone bench, barely dodging a slashing vibroblade as Tash scrambled out of the way. The battle droid that had once been Deevee hesitated a moment, unsure which target to pursue. Seeing his chance, Zak broke into a run, circling around the droid and joining up with his sister. Together they ran.

"D——Do we need to run?" Tash gasped. "I mean, if it's just a hologram..."

"Ask Lando," Zak sputtered in reply. "Whatever's happening here, it's real enough to kill if we let it. We have to find a way out. We have to get back to The Nightmare Machine."

Zak turned down a street he thought led back toward the center of Fun World. But the nightmarish landscape had fooled him. Instead of heading toward The Nightmare Machine, Zak and Tash found themselves on the green gem path they'd followed when they first arrived at Hologram Fun World. Before they knew it, they were standing at the door to the airlock.

"Blaster shot!" Zak swore. "How do we get back to The Nightmare Machine?"

"If we're already inside The Nightmare Machine, I'm not sure that would help, or that we could," Tash guessed. "How did Fajji say to end the game?"

"Of course!" Zak said. He yelled at the top of his lungs, "End simulation!"

Nothing happened.

He yelled it again and again. Each time nothing happened——except that his voice drew the battle droid to them. The droid appeared at the far end of the path, stomping toward them.

"It's not working," Zak groaned.

"What's the other way?" Tash tried to think. "Fajji said there was another way."

Zak remembered. "To win the game, you have to face your worst fear. Maybe that's what we have to do!"

"But we already have! We've lost our uncle! We lost Deevee! I lost the power I thought was the Force! What more could happen?"

Zak knew. He knew it as surely as he knew his own name, and he said it quickly. "We could lose each other."

The battle droid was closing in on them. "My *worst* fear isn't being attacked by technology, or eaten by a rancor, or even losing Uncle Hoole. Tash, my worst fear is losing you! My sister!"

The battle droid was almost upon them.

"Don't you see? We haven't faced our worst fear yet because we're still together!"

Zak's urgent words cut through Tash's brain like a laser. In the time it took to think a thought, she realized: "My intuition. It has been working all along. It's been trying to tell me, Zak. 'One of us must die!' Get it?"

A blaster bolt melted the gems in the path at their feet.

Zak looked around, and his eye settled on the airlock door. He pushed open the first door, and stepped into the airtight room beyond. Now just one thick door separated him from the lifeless void. He pointed. "Should we go together?"

Tash shook her head. "I think we have to separate. That's the fear. Being apart. *Losing* each other."

He nodded and reached for the button that would open the second door. "Zak!" Tash burst out. "Listen, I tease you a lot, but you're my brother, and—— "

"Yeah," he said, happy to interrupt his sister for once in a conversation. "Me too."

Zak put his hand on the button and looked hack. The battle droid was almost in reach of Tash. At the last moment, he hesitated. A new fear chilled his heart. What if *Tash* were a

hologram, too? What if she were an illusion designed to trick him into destroying himself?

He shrugged. That was just another fear he was going to have to face.

He pushed the button.

Zak felt like the hands of an invisible giant had thrown him out of Fun World. Head over heels, he found himself spinning out into... nothing. It wasn't air, it wasn't water. It was the void, and it was so cold that his hones turned instantly brittle.

Everything went black.

Chapter Seventeen

Zak woke with a jolt, as though his mind had suddenly slammed back into his body. He was lying on cold metal. For a moment, he could not move. His body felt heavy. His arms and legs were numb. He felt like he'd been sleeping for many hours. He could not open his eyes.

Straining with his ears, Zak heard a soft, wet, squishing sound, like the sound of liquid passing through a suction tube. The sound was very close. He listened carefully.

The sound was coming from right between his own eyes.

Because he was blind, his other senses sharpened, and Zak felt the skin on his forehead.

Something was stuck to the skin of his head. Something was stuck *into* the skin of his head.

Gathering all his strength, Zak forced his eyes to open. He was staring into a bright light and he blinked once, twice, three times, before his vision cleared.

He was lying down, looking up at the ceiling of The Nightmare Machine.

Between him and the ceiling, on a pedestal, crouched the brain creature. It screeched angrily at him. Zak managed to sit up.

Tash was lying on a table next to him, and she, too, was waking up. Beyond her was another table, and still another, where other victims lay unconscious. Each of them had a thick, wet tentacle attached to their foreheads. The strings of flesh stretched from each victim back to the fearsome creature's gaping mouth.

Zak's stomach turned when he realized that he, too, had a tentacle attached to his head. Gagging, he grabbed at the tendril. It ripped away from his skin with a sickening squish, and The Nightmare Machine creature wailed. Beside him, Tash freed herself the same way.

The creature squealed in pain and rose up to its full height. Its weird spindly arms thrashed through the air.

Then it fell back into a quivering crouch, snarling at Zak and Tash.

Zak and Tash backed away from the creature. The monster took one menacing step off its pedestal.

Zak felt his back touch a wall, and at the same time, he realized someone on the other side was pounding desperately on it. He turned, saw a door, and quickly slapped the opener. The door slid back.

Lando Calrissian leaped into the room, a small holdout blaster in his hand. The brain creature took another step forward, snarling at the newcomer. Without hesitating, Lando leveled his weapon and fired. An energy bolt pierced the creature's oversized head, shattering its skull.

"Lando!" Zak cried joyfully. "You're alive!"

The gambler's roguish grin was gone. "I could say the same for you, kid." He looked back over his shoulder. "Don't count your dragon eggs before they're hatched. We're not out of this yet."

"I'm afraid Master Calrissian is correct," said a familiar voice. Deevee stepped into the room. The *real* Deevee, Zak knew. He did not bother to greet his two charges. "The stormtroopers are closing in."

"Stormtroopers?" Tash asked.

Lando explained in a rush. "When you and Zak went back into The Nightmare Machine, Deevee and I were locked out. I complained to Fajji, but he said it was simply a malfunction. He said you were safe, and the problem would be corrected shortly. Deevee and I decided not to wait. You had already been in here an hour. We tried to break into the building a few minutes ago, and a squad of stormtroopers appeared out of nowhere!"

"Wait a minute!" Zak sputtered. "We've only been in here an hour? It seemed like days!"

"*Days*?" Lando asked. An energy beam shattered the wall beside him. "Never mind!"

"SURRENDER OR BE DESTROYED!" The voice that boomed over a loudspeaker was too powerful to be ignored. Zak peeked over Lando's shoulder as the gambler poked his head out of the building.

A hundred stormtroopers aimed their blasters at him.

They had no choice but to surrender. Lando dropped his blaster and stepped out into the open, followed by Zak, Tash, and Deevee. Stormtroopers rushed forward, roughly searching them all for any hidden weapons. Then they slapped binders on each of their wrists, including Deevee's. When the prisoners were secure, the crowd of stormtroopers parted, and a tall, gray, scowling figure stepped forward.

Borborygmus Gog.

The evil Shi'ido stepped past them and peered inside The Nightmare Machine. When he returned, his scowl had deepened into seething anger.

"*You*," he began, his voice filled with rage. "You two pathetic human children have caused me more trouble than a dozen rebellious star systems. You have destroyed every stage of Project Starscream, and now you have destroyed my latest experiment!" He pointed at the building. "The Nightmare Machine was a masterpiece of genetic mutation. A creature capable of entering

into its victims' nightmares, and using their own fears against them."

"You were using Fun World as an experiment," Zak said.

"You were using it on us!" Tash added. "But we figured you out."

The Shi'ido's eyes narrowed. "Indeed. You two are most remarkable." His dark eyes focused on Zak. "You are quite a resourceful young man, and you"——he glared at Tash——"this intuition of yours is intriguing. The Force, perhaps? We shall see."

Gog snapped his fingers, and the stormtroopers came to attention. "Guards. Take them all back to my starship. I want them transported to my laboratory. I plan to perform some in-depth experiments."

The way Gog said the word "experiments" made Zak's blood run cold.

Stormtroopers grabbed their arms and dragged them to a nearby hovercar. The four prisoners were loaded into the car. One stormtrooper took the driver's seat while the other stood guard over the captives. The hovercar hummed away from The Nightmare Machine.

No one spoke as the hovercar carried them to a nearby airlock. The guarding stormtrooper grabbed the prisoners one by one and hauled them through the airlock and into a waiting shuttle craft.

Inside the shuttle craft, Zak and the others sat in the cargo area behind the two pilot seats. A black-uniformed Imperial pilot sat in one seat. The guarding stormtrooper took the other.

A moment later, the shuttle detached itself from Fun World. From the back of the shuttle, Zak could just see the darkness of space through the front viewport. He watched as a tiny pinpoint of light grew into a massive star cruiser.

Zak looked at his sister and whispered, "Tash, I——"

"Quiet!" the black-garbed pilot snapped. He looked at the stormtrooper. "If they speak one more word, turn them all into Sarkanian jelly."

The stormtrooper nodded and raised his blaster threateningly.

Then he smashed the weapon against the side of the pilot's head.

The pilot collapsed to the floor, unconscious. "What in the galaxy——?" Lando gasped.

He was staring at the stormtrooper who was shimmering and twisting spasmodically.

When the stormtrooper stopped moving, Zak and Tash could not believe their eyes——the stormtrooper was Hoole!

Zak was the first to recover. "Uncle Hoole, how did you find us?"

"Time is short, Zak," the Shi'ido said tersely. "Let us say my investigation proved successful. I learned that Gog had come here. I raced to Fun World as soon as I could. Thanks to the distraction created by this gentle"——he pointed at' Lando——"and Deevee, I was able to disguise myself as a stormtrooper and infiltrate Gog's army."

Lando shook his head. "I've seen some pretty weird stuff in the galaxy," he murmured, "but this wins the prize. "

Hoole did not respond. With Lando's help, he quickly tied the unconscious pilot to a passenger seat, then turned to the ship's instruments and the shuttle roared into full power. The ship swerved off course and blasted away from Hologram Fun World and the waiting cruiser.

Aboard the starship, Gog's henchmen were startled to see their master's shuttle change course. But by the time they had turned their ship to pursue, the shuttle was gone.

Epilogue

Hours later, Gog's shuttle had been abandoned to the depths of space. Lando had summoned his own ship using his remote control device, and his space yacht now hovered next to the *Shroud*.

Over the comm system, Lando spoke. "Isn't there any way I can help you?"

"We could not ask it of you," Hoole replied. "You will be safest if you keep your distance. I fear we have made a powerful enemy."

There was a pause, then Lando's voice came back. "I know where you can hide. I'm on my way to investigate a Tibanna gas mine on Bespin. You'll be safe there."

Again, Hoole refused. Zak spoke into the microphone. "Thanks for everything, Lando, and good luck!"

Lando laughed. "And you remember, Zak, that luck's got nothing to do with it!"

Long after Lando's space yacht had roared away, Hoole listened solemnly as Zak and Tash told them about their nightmare trip to Fun World and about the strange creature Gog had created.

When they were done, Hoole closed his eyes briefly and whispered to himself. "It is worse than I feared. Gog is farther along than I suspected."

Zak cocked his head. "Did you know about The Nightmare Machine experiment?"

Hoole shook his head. "No. I've known very little about Gog's experiments until recently. After I left you two at Hologram Fun World, I called on some...private sources. I learned that Gog's next experiment involved that creature. I also learned that he had discovered your location and was planning his revenge. As soon as I learned that, I rushed back to help."

"Did Gog create The Nightmare Machine just for us?" Tash asked in a frightened whisper.

The Shi'ido shook his head. "No. I think The Nightmare Machine was his next experiment. But he clearly planned to use you two as his test subjects. That way he could kill two mynocks with one blaster bolt——get his revenge and test his next experiment. But The Nightmare Machine is like all the things we've uncovered. The living planet, the zombies, the virus, and now The Nightmare Machine——they're all just small parts of a much larger plot."

"Project Starscream," Zak said ominously. "Uncle Hoole, I've got so many questions. Where did you go to get this information? And how long have you known Gog?"

"And," Tash added, remembering the file ForceFlow had sent them, "what happened during the missing years of your life?"

Hoole frowned. "We are still in too much danger to answer those questions."

Tash cocked her head. "But, Uncle Hoole, you just saved us."

The Shi'ido shook his head sternly. "You saved yourselves from The Nightmare Machine. But none of us are out of danger, I'm afraid."

Zak blinked. "Why? We escaped, didn't we?"

Hoole checked the shuttle's instruments as it swerved off course and blasted away from Hologram Fun World. "For the

moment. But Gog is extremely vengeful. I believe that our peril has just begun."

Book Five
Ghost of the Jedi

Prologue

The shuttle's door opened onto the gray landscape of a dead world. The wind howled across the dry plain, whistling among sharp, jagged slabs of rock that seemed to grow out of the ground like stone trees.

Borborygmus Gog stumbled out of the shuttle. He was frustrated.

His frustration turned to pure hatred when he saw who was waiting for him on the planet's surface.

"What an unexpected pleasure," he sneered.

Darth Vader withstood the howling wind, stronger than the jagged rocks around him. "I am here to fix Project Starscream."

Gog glared. "Project Starscream does not need to be fixed."

Vader tilted his head forward, looking down on the doctor. "Are you certain? Hoole has proved himself to be a formidable enemy. I warned you before not to be overconfident. Now Hoole has ruined the first four stages of Starscream, and he is still on the loose, thanks to your incompetence."

The skin on Gog's back rippled. He hated Vader, hated his power and his arrogance. Gog wanted that power——more than anything he wanted to take Vader's place beside the Emperor's throne. Gog was a Shi'ido, a shapechanger. He felt the urge to transform into a wampa ice beast and rip out Vader's throat. He

eyed the lightsaber hanging from Vader's belt. He was sure he could reach Vader before the Dark Lord drew his weapon.

But Vader also commanded the Force, and against that, Gog had no defense. At least not yet.

He said, "The project is at a very important stage. The fifth experiment is crucial. Besides, the Emperor himself put me in charge of Project Starscream. It is *my* responsibility."

Vader's breath rasped through his face mask. "And the Emperor himself has asked me to make sure it proceeds with no interference. I have already ordered the deaths of Hoole and his family."

"No!" Gog blurted.

The Dark Lord's voice was threatening. "What?"

Gog recovered himself and said calmly, "That is, there is something peculiar about Hoole's niece and nephew——especially the niece. They are worth further study."

Vader scoffed. "You tried using them with your Nightmare Machine project and failed. Now they threaten everything."

"But——"

"The order is given," Vader interrupted. "I have already sent an assassin to find them."

With that, Vader whirled around and strode away. Somewhere out there, his ship and his soldiers lurked.

Gog resisted the urge to draw his blaster and shoot Vader in the back. The Dark Lord would know without turning around if he even reached for his weapon. Vader had the Force.

The Force. If his plans were to succeed, Gog needed something to defeat the Force.

A cold smile crept across Gog's lips. He had not told Vader why Hoole's niece and nephew——especially the niece——interested him. And why the fifth experiment was so important.

It had to do with the Force.

Gog knew he had to act fast if he was to beat Vader. He laughed to himself. Vader wanted the Arrandas killed. Gog wanted them alive.

Hoole and his friends would be lucky if Vader's assassin found them first.

Chapter One

The laser blasts came close. Too close.

One of the energy bolts glanced off the side of the ship, and Tash and Zak felt the *Shroud* buck under the blast. But the shields held. The *Shroud* was a good ship.

"She'll hold together," Zak said. "I think."

As if determined to prove him wrong, another laser bolt struck the ship, sending a shock wave from stem to stern.

"There are two more coming in," Deevee said.

"I see them," Uncle Hoole said tightly.

He banked the ship hard to the left. As the ship spun, Tash caught a glimpse of one of the ships that was chasing them.

An Imperial Star Destroyer.

A dozen laser cannons sent energy beams streaking toward them. Luckily, the *Shroud* was fast, and Hoole managed to slip away from most of them.

"We can't take another hit like that!" Zak said. "Quiet," Hoole ordered. "I've almost loaded the coordinates for the hyperspace jump."

Tash tried not to think about the facts. Imperial Star Destroyers were the most powerful ships in the galaxy. They were huge, and had hundreds of weapons that could turn most other ships into space vapor. Despite their size, they were also

incredibly fast. Very few ships could outrun them. One Star Destroyer could wipe out a fleet of smaller ships.

And four of them were chasing the *Shroud*.

They had been tailing Hoole and the Arrandas since their recent escape from the Hologram Fun World. For awhile Hoole thought he had lost them, but the Imperial ships had merely sent a signal to another fleet, and now they were nearly surrounded.

A direct hit from a Star Destroyer's cannon made the ship groan. A warning light flashed on the control panel.

"We've lost the main deflector shield!" Zak called out. "The next shot will vaporize us!"

"Almost there," Hoole said to himself. His fingers flew frantically over the controls.

"They're firing again!"

"There!" Hoole said. He pulled a large switch on the *Shroud*'s control panel. The ship lurched forward as though dragged by giant hands, and plunged into the streaking white light of hyperspace.

A few hours later, the *Shroud* still hurtled through the swirling whiteness of hyperspace. In the cockpit, four figures huddled over the control console, their faces lit by the red glow of the instrument panel as the *Shroud* traveled through the most desolate parts of the galaxy.

"Where are we?" asked Tash Arranda.

"I don't recognize any of these star charts," said her brother, Zak.

"If I'm not mistaken," said the droid DV-9, "these coordinates will take us far into the Outer Rim. This is the least colonized part of the galaxy, and the farthest away from the center of Imperial power."

"Correct, Deevee," replied Hoole curtly.

Tash and Zak exchanged glances. For the seven months they had known him, Uncle Hoole had been close-mouthed and stiff-necked. They figured he was constantly in a bad mood because he was a Shi'ido. The Shi'ido species tended to be more serious

than humans. But for the past several hours, Hoole had burned with the intensity of a superlaser. He had not left the cockpit once as he piloted the *Shroud* on a frantic starhopping course, taking them from one star system to another, never stopping, never even slowing down.

Zak pointed to an indicator light that flashed an alarming shade of red. "One of the power couplings is overheating."

"Ignore it," Hoole said.

Zak blinked. He had a mind for mechanics and knew what the warning light meant. "If we don't let the engines cool, the power coupling could blow, and——"

"Ignore it," Hoole snapped again. "That is the least of our concerns."

Tash looked at her brother, who mouthed three words: This. Is. Bad.

Tash wondered how much worse things could get after their escape from the Hologram Fun World. Zak and Tash had nearly been trapped there by an evil scientist named Borborygmus Gog. They had been saved only by their own quick thinking, the help of a good-hearted gambler named Lando Calrissian, and the courage of Uncle Hoole. Like all Shi'ido, Hoole had the power to change his shape. Disguised as an Imperial stormtrooper, he had freed Tash, Zak, and the others, and they had slipped from Gog's clutches. But their escape did not seem to ease Hoole's tension.

"Uncle Hoole," Tash asked gently, "can you tell us any more about what's going on?"

Hoole clenched his jaw as he punched new coordinates into the *Shroud*'s navicomputer. "I know little more than you do, Tash. Gog is working on an experiment called Project Starscream. The Imperial government is involved at the highest levels. Not only have we made ourselves Gog's enemies, we may have fallen under the eye of the Emperor himself."

Tash and Zak both swallowed hard. The *Emperor*? Tales of his power, and his cruelty, were known throughout the galaxy.

When their adventures had begun, and Hoole had started to act so strangely, Tash at first had thought her uncle was working for the Empire. He always seemed to know what the Imperials were doing and where to find them. But slowly Tash had realized that Hoole wasn't an Imperial. In fact, he seemed to be working *against* the Empire.

A new thought crept into Tash's mind. Was Hoole a Rebel? Perhaps Hoole was spying on Gog for the Rebels. Tash was pretty sure that Hoole knew some Rebels. Once, they all had been rescued from one of Gog's experiments by an odd group of travelers——two men, a woman, two droids, and a Wookiee. At the time, Tash had thought their rescuers were Rebels. She still thought so.

Zak interrupted her thoughts. "If the whole Empire is after us, what are we going to do?"

Tash looked directly at Uncle Hoole and said meaningfully, "Maybe we should try to contact the Rebels."

Hoole said without hesitation, "That might work, Tash, if we knew how to contact them."

"You mean, you don't know how?" she challenged.

Hoole raised an eyebrow. "Of course not. If the Rebels were that easy to find, the Empire would have destroyed them long ago."

"Oh," she said, disappointed. "I just thought... I mean..."

Hoole almost smiled. "You thought I was a Rebel? No, Tash, I have no more connection with the Rebel Alliance than you do."

"But, then how did you learn about Project Starscream? How do you know so much about Gog, and why does he seem to know you?" Tash said. "Why were you investigating his experiments?"

Hoole paused. "I have my reasons. But you've given me an idea, Tash. Strap yourselves in."

Tash had no time to repeat her question as Hoole punched a new set of commands into the navicomputer. She and Zak slipped into their crash webbing and Deevee braced his

mechanical body against the hull of the ship as the *Shroud* groaned into an even higher speed. Gauges bleeped angrily and the engines began to whine. Just when Zak and Tash thought the ship would burst at the seams, Hoole pulled back on a lever and the white streaks of hyperspace gave way to a brilliant starfield. In the distance they could see a bright yellow planet.

"What's that?" Tash asked.

Hoole guided the ship toward the growing yellow sphere. "It is a place far from Imperial eyes. With luck, it's also where we'll find out how to contact the Rebels."

"Thank goodness we've found someplace safe," Deevee sighed.

Hoole turned his dark eyes on the droid and the two young humans. "I did not say we were safe. We are entering a wretched hive of scum and villainy."

The *Shroud* rocketed planetside. It settled almost unnoticed into a fleet of old freighters docked on the outskirts of a small town that baked under the heat of two blazing suns. They climbed from their ship and Hoole led them to a dusty lot, where a tall insectoid creature rented and sold transport vehicles. After some haggling, Hoole rented a creaking landspeeder that barely managed to hover off the ground. The landspeeder's repulsors whined as Zak, Tash, and Deevee clambered aboard.

Moments later, the landspeeder carried them away from the settlement and out into a wide, flat desert.

Tash stared at the horizon, where yellow sand met a clear blue sky. "I think this whole planet is made of sand," she muttered.

"That is correct," Hoole replied. "This place is called Tatooine. I did research here once. It is an dry, unpleasant planet. I was happy to leave it."

"Then what are we doing here?" Zak asked.

"You will see," Hoole answered.

Hoole guided the landspeeder far out into the empty desert. The terrain was so barren and lifeless that Tash thought Hoole had made a mistake. But just when she was convinced that they

were lost, a massive fortress appeared on the horizon, squatting like a toad at the foot of a large, rocky mountain.

Hoole pulled the landspeeder up to the gates of the structure and jumped out. As he approached the doors, a large electronic eye popped out of a hatch and scanned him. Then it asked a question in a language neither Zak nor Tash understood.

"I wish to see your master," Hoole replied in Basic, the galaxy's universal language. "Tell him Hoole is here."

The sentry eye retreated through the hatch. A moment later a deep rumble shook the ground, and the great gates opened to admit them. Beyond the gates, a hallway led into darkness like a passage into the underworld.

"Stay close to me," Hoole ordered.

He didn't have to tell them twice. Zak and Tash clung to his blue robe as they followed him down the hallway.

Tash heard a sharp, steady *click-click* sound from the shadows. Turning, she saw a large mechanical spider stalk slowly past them, its metal legs scratching against the floor. A large, transparent globe bulged from its belly. Inside the globe floated a living brain.

"Disgusting," Tash gagged.

"A brain spider," Deevee noted. "Fascinating. I had heard of such things, but I'd never seen one."

"Well, I hope I never see another one," Zak added with a shudder.

A moment later they were halted by two pig-like Gamorrean guards. Once again Hoole stated his name, and the guards let him pass.

Where is he taking us? Tash thought to herself. Then something occurred to her that was more frightening than a brain spider: Uncle Hoole was known in this place.

As they approached the end of a hall, Tash heard the sound of music and voices drifting up from below. And as soon as they started down the wide stairway, Tash's senses were assaulted by

the loudest, strongest, most sickening collection of noises, smells, and sights they had ever encountered.

"Oh, my," Deevee gasped.

In a wide audience hall, crowds of aliens laughed, ate, drank, and fought. A gang of Gamorreans wrestled on three low benches and tables. Six multi-legged creatures were playing a dice game in one corner, while in another, an alien band played a frantic tune. The entire chamber was a riot of activity, except for one curious corner where a quiet man sat observing the madness.

In the center of the large room, a space had been cleared where four humans were tormenting a small, rodent-like Ranat. The Ranat had been blindfolded and his ears plugged with wax. The poor creature squealed and stumbled around, completely blind and deaf. The humans dodged away from the Ranat, laughing at their cruel game of tag.

In the middle of this chaos, on a high platform, sat a large, slug-like Hutt, smacking his lips as he stuffed live eels into his mouth with loud slurps. The Hutt laughed as the blind and deaf Ranat fell to his knees.

Hoole descended into the craziness and strode up to the platform. As if on cue, the music stopped, the cruel game of tag ended, and all eyes turned to the newcomers. The massive Hutt let out a deep, rumbling laugh and stared down at the Shi'ido and his companions.

"Well, well!" boomed the creature on the platform. "If it isn't Dr. Hoole himself! I always knew that someday you would fall into my hands once more! Welcome back to the palace of Jabba the Hutt!"

Chapter Two

Jabba the Hutt.

The name boomed through Tash's brain and sent a tremor down her spine.

Jabba the Hutt.

Everyone in the galaxy knew that name. Jabba was legendary. He was a gang boss and a crime lord. Ruler of an underground empire of smugglers, thieves, and assassins. Older kids used his name to scare younger children: "You'd better watch out or Jabba will come and grab ya." Jabba's name was a code word for every danger that lurked in the shadows of the galaxy.

To Tash, Jabba had always been just that, though——a word. She had never thought he was real. Yet now she stood before the mighty Hutt himself, who rolled in his folds of fat.

And Uncle Hoole knows him!

Tash looked up at her uncle, a thousand questions threatening to pour out of her mouth. But she bit her lip and held them back. This was no time to interrupt.

"Greetings, Jabba," Hoole said in a clipped voice. "It has been a long time."

"Not long enough," the Hutt rumbled. "Hutts have long memories. I don't forget that you walked out my door years ago."

"I assure you, great Jabba, that it was nothing personal," Hoole replied. "I walked away from many others, including some enemies of yours." Hoole's voice was measured. The Shi'ido did his best to look polite and friendly, but he made sure to meet the intense gaze of the crime lord.

Tash sensed that an important game——maybe even a game of life or death——was being played. If Uncle Hoole offended Jabba, the Hutt might lose his temper and have them killed. But if Hoole showed any sign of weakness, Jabba might lose respect, and have them killed out of sheer boredom.

Jabba reached into a water-filled bowl and pulled out a toad-like creature. It squealed loudly as it struggled to escape Jabba's grasp. The squealing stopped as the massive Hutt dropped the live toad into his mouth. Jabba licked his fingers. "Now then, what brings you to my humble abode?"

Hoole said, "I need your help."

"Ha, ha, ha!" The entire room erupted into laughter, with Jabba's voice booming over the others. Weequays, Rodians, and a dozen other species chittered and gurgled in amusement.

"I do not understand what is so humorous," Deevee whispered.

"It's like the whole galaxy's laughing at us," Zak muttered.

Hoole glared at his nephew. Then he turned back to Jabba, who said, "And why should I help you? I could just as easily feed you to the marvelous rancor I just acquired."

Hoole swallowed. Zak thought he looked like a gambler about to play his last card. The Shi'ido said, "Because I'm worth more to you alive than dead. Besides, if you help me, you know I'll owe you a favor."

The creatures surrounding the Hutt murmured. Jabba lowered the heavy lids of his bulging eyes and rumbled "Hmm..."

Tash looked at Deevee and whispered, "What did he just do?"

Deevee's circuits seemed to be shaking. "Master Hoole has just offered to put himself in Jabba the Hutt's debt. Hutts *always* collect on their debts."

When Jabba finally spoke, his voice was triumphant. "I am inclined to be generous today, Hoole. Especially since you did me the favor of eliminating one of my rivals when you destroyed Smada the Hutt."

Tash blinked. They had encountered Smada the Hutt on D'vouran, the living planet. But they hadn't told anyone. How could Jabba possibly have known?

Jabba seemed to read her mind. "Information travels far, and it all ends up here," he said, tapping his chest with one plump finger. "I know you caused Smada's very timely death."

"No, we didn't!" Tash blurted out. Then her throat tightened up as she felt all the eyes in the room turn toward her. "I mean... that is... he... we all needed to work together to get off the planet, but he only thought of himself. He killed himself. Uncle Hoole would never kill anyone."

"Indeed?" Jabba rumbled with amusement. "Are we speaking of the same Hoole that——"

"Great Jabba!" Hoole said quickly. "We would not want to take up more of your time than necessary. Will you give me the information I need?"

The Hutt smiled a slimy smile. "Perhaps, Hoole. Ask your question, and I may do you this favor."

Hoole nodded. "If it is true that all information ends up in your palace, then I want you to tell me how to contact the Rebel Alliance."

Once again Jabba's gang burst into laughter. Hoole stood stone still, but Tash and Zak fidgeted anxiously as Jabba's roaring continued. Finally, the Hutt calmed down. "You amuse me, Hoole. Even *I* do not know where the Rebels are hiding. If I did, I would have sold the information to the Empire long ago, and made a nice profit."

Hoole frowned. "Then you cannot help me, and our bargain is cancelled." He turned to go.

"Wait!" the Hutt boomed. Tash could tell that, despite his arrogance, Jabba wanted to do Hoole a favor. He wanted to have

the Shi'ido in his debt. The crime lord continued, "I don't know where the Rebels are, but I have heard stories of strange activities in the Auril system. Rumor has it that the Jedi are somehow involved."

Tash's heart skipped a beat. The Jedi! Ever since she first heard of them, Tash had been fascinated by the Jedi. She had read everything she could about them and their control of the mysterious Force. She had even dreamed of becoming one—— but the Jedi were supposed to be extinct, wiped out by the Emperor. Could there still be Jedi Knights left in the galaxy?

Hoole studied the Hutt closely. "There are no Jedi left. Are you seriously suggesting we look for help from the Jedi?"

Jabba raised his fat hands. "I am merely passing along information. Unusual events are taking place in the Auril system, and they are said to have something to do with the Jedi. That is all."

Hoole considered a moment longer, then gave a slight bow. "You have my thanks."

Motioning for Zak, Tash, and Deevee to follow, Hoole turned and left the room. Just as they reached the exit, they heard Jabba's voice thunder after them, "And remember, Hoole, you now owe me a favor!"

The Hutt's laughter seemed to follow them out into the open air.

Chapter Three

The rented landspeeder hummed across the sands of the desert planet as Hoole sped back toward their waiting ship.

"The Jedi!" Tash said, unable to contain herself. "Could there really be Jedi out there somewhere? Do you think it's true?"

"No," said Hoole flatly.

"Why not?" Tash challenged.

Hoole kept his eyes on yellow dunes before them as he said to his niece, "Tash, you know as well as I do that the Emperor destroyed the Jedi. There's nothing left of them but the illegal stories you've collected from the HoloNet."

Tash frowned. "But then why would Jabba the Hutt tell you to go there?"

Hoole shrugged. "It is true that Jabba knows a lot about what happens in the galaxy——that is why I risked this visit. But I find it difficult to believe that he has located Jedi Knights that the Emperor doesn't know about. I doubt we would find anything useful if we followed his advice."

"Then what are we going to do?" Zak asked. "Gog is still out there somewhere." He looked at Tash. "Maybe we should try to get in touch with ForceFlow."

ForceFlow was a contact Tash had made over the galaxy-wide computer network called the HoloNet. She had never met him,

but she had exchanged messages with him many times. He was a mysterious figure who spied on the Empire. When the government erased all information about the Jedi from the HoloNet, ForceFlow continued to upload stories and legends of the Jedi Knights for people to read. That was how Tash first learned of the fabled Jedi.

Deevee shook his silver-domed head. "That certainly wouldn't get us very far. We have very little information about this contact. We don't even know where he is located. It sounds too risky to me."

Zak scowled. "It's not any riskier than going to see Jabba the Hutt."

"Zak has a point," Hoole mused, "I don't entirely trust this ForceFlow. But he seems to know a great deal about recent events. And we are running out of options." Hoole glanced at his niece. "Perhaps, Tash, it is time we met your friend."

They reached the *Shroud* just as Tatooine's twin suns had begun to set, turning the yellow sand the color of blood. Several small, brown-robed figures scurried around the base of the ship as if sizing it up.

"Hey, get away from our ship!" Zak yelled.

The dwarfish creatures looked up with surprise in their glowing yellow eyes, then scurried into the shadows. "What were they?" Tash asked.

"Jawas," Hoole replied. "Scavengers. They're cowards, and usually harmless."

Deevee huffed, "Cowards? They seemed rather bold to me. It is not as though our ship were abandoned."

"They may have thought it was." Hoole punched in the code that opened the ship's hatch. He ushered them all in. "Many who go into Jabba's palace never come out again."

Hoole's comment brought all of Tash's unanswered questions back to mind. How did Uncle Hoole know Jabba the Hutt? Had they worked together in the past? Had Hoole been a criminal?

Was he still a criminal? If so, why was he pursuing Gog and Project Starscream?

"Tash?"

Uncle Hoole's voice interrupted her thoughts, and she realized that he had been speaking to her. "Hm? What, Uncle Hoole?"

"I said," the Shi'ido repeated sternly, "do you think you can get in touch with ForceFlow over the HoloNet?"

"It's hard to say," Tash replied as she headed for the computer terminal in the ship's lounge. "Sometimes he responds right away, and sometimes it's like he's hiding. I think he has to be careful that the Empire doesn't track his signal."

Tash dropped into the chair and started punching commands into the computer terminal. She loved exploring the HoloNet. Although she was sitting at a computer terminal inside a small ship, the entire galaxy lay at her fingertips. With the push of a button she could listen to music from the planet Bith or study documents from the archives on Coruscant. Even these days, when the Empire restricted access, the HoloNet was still exciting.

Tash typed in her HoloNet code name at the computer's prompt:

MESSAGE FROM: SEARCHER1

Next she typed in ForceFlow's name:

MESSAGE TO: FORCEFLOW

And finally, Tash keyed in her message:

NEED YOUR HELP IMMEDIATELY.

She punched in the code to send the message, then turned to Hoole, Zak, and Deevee, who waited anxiously behind her.

"You might want to sit down," she suggested. "He never responds right a——"

Bleep! Bleep!

A beeping interrupted her as a message appeared on the computer screen.

MESSAGE RECEIVED, SEARCHER. WHAT CAN I DO FOR YOU?

"You were saying?" Zak laughed.

Tash raised an eyebrow. "That was quick." She turned back to the control panel.

PROJECT STARSCREAM HAS GOTTEN TOO HOT FOR US. WE NEED A SAFE PLACE TO HIDE FROM THE EMPIRE AND WE NEED INFORMATION.

ForceFlow responded:

YES, I HEARD ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED AT HOLOGRAM FUN WORLD. I WARNED YOU NOT TO GET INVOLVED WITH PROJECT STARSCREAM.

"How does he get his information?" Zak muttered. "He knows as much about us as we do."

"Getting information is his specialty," Tash told her brother.

Tash replied:

IT'S TOO LATE FOR THAT. CAN WE MEET WITH YOU?

There was a pause. The computer's screen's cursor blinked rapidly in time with Tash's fluttering heart. She had been in contact with ForceFlow for over a year now——since before the Empire had destroyed her homeworld——but she had never asked him his real name, nor where he lived. He had given her volumes of information about the Jedi Knights and their ways, and he'd never asked for anything except privacy. Now she felt like she'd asked for too much.

Finally, a stream of words flashed across the computer screen.

AFFIRMATIVE. I THINK IT'S TIME WE MET FACE TO FACE. I'M SENDING YOU MY COORDINATES NOW. I'LL BE WAITING.

A moment later, a line of stellar coordinates appeared on the screen.

Tash sighed. "That's it. We're going to meet ForceFlow at last."

Deevee gave an electronic sniff. "I hope that we can trust him."

Zak snorted. "It can't be any worse than Jabba's advice."

Hoole examined the coordinates. "Let's hope you're right, Zak, because they've both given us the exact same advice. These coordinates will take us right to the Auril system."

***

Like Tatooine, the Auril system was in the deserted Outer Rim sector of the galaxy. Once the *Shroud* blasted out of Tatooine's atmosphere, the trip only took a few hours. But it seemed longer, because Deevee took it upon himself to educate Zak and Tash on the history of that entire quadrant of the galaxy. Even as Uncle Hoole prepared to drop the ship out of hyperspace, Deevee continued talking:

...and finally, the Auril system was completely abandoned when the Empire took power," the droid droned on as the hyperdrive engines cut off. "These days, there is nothing for a thousand light-years. No developed planets, no Imperial colonies, not even reports of smugglers in the area. There is absolutely nothing out here."

"Oh yeah?" Zak gasped. "What's that?"

The *Shroud* exited hyperspace and cruised into star-specked realspace——but all the stars had been blotted out. Some huge object filled the view screen——an enormous, shadowy object drifting through the cosmos. The massive object loomed larger as the *Shroud* hurtled toward it.

"Look out!" Tash yelled.
They were on a collision course.

Chapter Four

"We're doomed!" Deevee screeched.

Hoole kept calm. Pulling hard on the ship's controls, he veered left. The *Shroud*'s hull groaned under the strain, and they heard the sound of rivets snapping in the metal walls. Despite Hoole's efforts, for a few moments it looked like Deevee had been right. The ship was too close to the side of the massive structure.

"We're not going to make it!" Deevee moaned, covering his photoreceptors with his silver hands.

The *Shroud* scraped along the side of the barrier; the shriek of metal on metal sent shivers down Tash's spine. But then the starship curved up and away from the dark wall and back into the safety of space.

"Great flying, Uncle Hoole!" Tash cheered.

"Yeah, and a great ship too," Zak said, giving the hull of the *Shroud* a friendly pat.

"Indeed," Hoole agreed. "Now, let's have a look at this object. It looks very old, but it does not appear on any of the star charts."

Hoole turned the ship around and this time he approached the object more slowly.

It was a space station, but not one of the small orbital platforms that circled most planets. This looked like the largest space station ever built. If some brilliant beings had wanted to build an artificial continent, or even a small planet, they could not have done better than this.

By the decayed look of the metal, and the pockmarks left by years of asteroid collisions, the station must have been hundreds, maybe thousands of years old. Different areas of the station seemed to have been designed by different engineers as well. It looked as though it had been added to and expanded over the centuries. The station was a dozen kilometers high and its length was impossible to guess——it stretched on forever in every direction.

And it was absolutely dark. Not a single running light, or landing beacon, or environmental glow panel burned anywhere along its length.

"By the Maker," Deevee said softly. "That is Nespis 8.

"Nespis 8?" Zak asked. "You know this place, Deevee?"

"Only from my extensive historical files," Deevee replied sarcastically. "After all, I was a cultural research droid before I become your caretaker, and I was considered reasonably efficient at my job."

Uncle Hoole seemed unconvinced. "Deevee, I thought Nespis 8 was just a legend. Recheck your memory banks."

"What's Nespis 8?" Tash asked.

The droid paused while his computer brain verified the information. "It is confirmed, Master Hoole. Based on its size, and its apparent age, that is indeed Nespis 8."

"What's Nespis 8?" Tash repeated in exasperation.

Deevee ignored her tone. "According to legend, the Jedi Knights built the space station Nespis 8 as a meeting place for scientists from across the galaxy. The station was devoted to knowledge and learning, and it was considered neutral territory. Even if two planets were involved in a brutal war, their scientists could come to Nespis to do research. As knowledge grew, so did

the station, until it was supposed to have grown to the size of a small planet. The legends say that Nespis 8 contained all the knowledge in the galaxy. Including," Deevee added, casting a meaningful look in Tash's direction, "all the wisdom of the Jedi."

"The Jedi," Tash breathed the word as if it were a wish.

"That's correct," the droid affirmed. "It is said that the Jedi maintained a library on Nespis that contained all the writings of their ancient masters. But few dared to look for it. I have heard it said that the halls of Nespis 8 are haunted by the ghost of a Dark Jedi——"

"A *Dark* Jedi?" Zak asked, half-joking. "Now there are dark Jedi too?"

"Dark Jedi," Deevee explained, "were Jedi Knights who served the dark side of the Force. Now please let me finish." The droid paused. "They say Nespis 8 fell to the dark side, and the library was put under a curse forbidding anyone to enter. Only a true Jedi could enter the library and resist the dark-side curse. Of course, all of this is just a legend, and not a very convincing one, in my opinion."

"Whooo!" Zak gave a mock shudder. "Dark Jedi curses—— scary stuff."

Hoole dismissed the story with a shrug. "The galaxy is full of rumors. This one is nothing more than an old spacer's story"

"Even if it's not," Zak said, "it shouldn't bother Tash. Since she's our resident Jedi, she should be safe as a Wookiee in a tree!"

"Shut up, Zak!" Tash snapped. She hadn't meant to react so sharply, but she didn't like Zak joking about her interest in the Jedi. Sometimes she felt strange sensations, almost like warnings——warnings she hoped were the beginning of the Force growing in her. But her dreams of becoming a Jedi Knight had seemed to fall apart recently. On their last adventure, Tash had had the chance to wield a Jedi lightsaber. She had failed miserably. "Besides," Tash grumbled finally, "everyone knows there's no such thing as ghosts."

"Enough," Hoole said. "We have far more urgent concerns. This is where ForceFlow told us to meet him, but this station is enormous. I have no idea where we might find——"

The Shi'ido was interrupted by the bleep of an indicator light.

Zak checked the reading, then pointed toward a wide opening in the side of the space station. "Someone just activated a homing beacon. It's coming from that landing bay."

Hoole looked sidelong at his niece. "Well, Tash, it appears your friend ForceFlow is extending his hand to welcome us."

The *Shroud* banked toward the darkened landing bay and settled into a cavernous chamber. To everyone's surprise, as soon as the ship came to a halt, an energy field activated at the edge of the landing bay, blocking out the freezing cold of space. Seconds later, breathable air began to flood the space dock.

"Someone is definitely expecting us," Zak muttered.

"Of course," Tash said. "ForceFlow wouldn't let us down."

"Opening the hatch," Hoole declared.

The *Shroud*'s hatch opened with a loud squeal that reverberated through the docking bay. Only the dim glow of the ship's landing lights cut through the darkness. As Tash passed in front of one of those lights, she cast a long, thin shadow that stretched out for thirty meters across the floor.

Her footsteps echoed mournfully. She stopped. As the echoes died, she thought she heard something else. It sounded like cloth brushing against skin, or a soft breath.

"Hello?" she called out.

"Hello? Hello? Hello?" the walls of the empty space station replied.

"Creepy," Zak whispered. "It doesn't look like there's anyone here."

"I suppose the systems could have been automated," Deevee suggested.

Zak looked at his sister, who was staring off into the darkness. "Tash, do you sense anything?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. It doesn't matter. I'm not a Jedi, anyway."

Uncle Hoole considered. "Perhaps we should have a look around. Stay close..."

Tash wasn't listening. Despite what she had said, she *did* feel something. She just couldn't tell what. In the past, when she sensed danger, it was like a pit opening in her stomach. But this was... different. It was like someone was out there, in the darkness, staring at her. She felt like the Ranat in Jabba the Hutt's palace——blind and deaf, trying to touch someone she couldn't see or hear. Before she knew it, she had wandered away from the others, deep into the darkness of the space station. The ship's lights were now only a distant gray blur, almost lost in the thick blackness. Tash waved her hand before her face, but couldn't see it.

She still felt someone's presence.

She groped blindly forward, afraid of stumbling over anything in the dark. She was sure at any moment that she would find something. Something was there, she was sure.

Her hand touched cold metal. She had reached the wall of the docking bay. She felt around for a moment——nothing there. It was just a wall. Confused and frustrated, Tash turned to head back to the others.

As she did, she felt a cold breath on her back, and a heavy hand fell on her shoulder.

Chapter Five

The grip on Tash's shoulder tightened and she let out a yelp of surprise. Her cry bounced back and forth on the walls until it sounded like an army of frightened voices.

"Be silent," said a deep voice. The strong hand on her shoulder turned her around slowly. There was a soft click, and a small glow rod ignited and slowly grew in power, illuminating the air around it. Tash winced, expecting to see someone——or something——horrible.

Instead, she found herself looking up at the most handsome man she had ever seen. His hair was as dark as a midnight sky. His blue eyes twinkled as brightly as stars. His face was creased as if from years of care, and softened only by a dark moustache. He carried himself confidently. He reminded Tash of the gambler Lando Calrissian, but he lacked the roguish air of a con man.

"I will not hurt you," said the man. His voice was smooth and comforting. "You are Searcher 1?" he asked, using Tash's HoloNet code name.

"Y-Yes," she managed to say. "You can call me Tash."

The man nodded. "Greetings, Tash. I am ForceFlow."

"ForceFlow," she repeated, hardly believing it. She had met him at last. The man who had first introduced her to the legends

of the Jedi Knights. The man who risked his life to make others aware of the evil acts of the Empire. He looked exactly as she had imagined.

"I did not mean to frighten you," he said.

"You didn't —— I mean, I just thought there was nothing behind me but a wall. And then I felt this cold breath, and..."

ForceFlow pointed his small glow rod toward the wall. A small door had slid open, revealing a passageway beyond. "I came through there. You must have felt the air shift."

His words were drowned out by the clanging echoes of approaching footsteps. Hoole, Zak, and Deevee had heard Tash cry out. A beam of light swept across the wall and settled on them both.

"Tash, are you all right?" Hoole demanded.

Tash blinked in the bright light. "I'm fine, Uncle Hoole."

By this time she had regained her composure. She introduced the others to ForceFlow, who shook Hoole's and Zak's hands. He even gave Deevee a slight bow.

"And what should we call you?" Hoole asked. "ForceFlow is only your HoloNet code name, isn't it?"

The man hesitated. "ForceFlow will do. Now, if you'll follow me, I can take you to a comfortable place, where we can talk."

They waited while Deevee secured the ship in dry dock, then they all followed ForceFlow down the passageway he had opened. The corridor led to several intersections, all of them dark. But ForceFlow seemed to know his way, lighting their path with his glow rod.

"Pardon me, sir," Deevee asked as they walked. "But am I right in assuming that this, in fact, is Nespis 8?"

ForceFlow glanced over his shoulder. "It is. Unless you believe the fools who say Nespis is only a legend."

Hoole said, "But it is hard to believe that such a large and famous space station could remain undiscovered for so long."

ForceFlow shook his head. "Nespis is not 'undiscovered.' I have known about it for years. Scavengers and looters come by

every now and then to pick over the ruins. And lately, there have been fortune hunters. We'll probably run into a few of them here. Don't worry, they're mostly bored professors who have retired from teaching to try something more exciting."

"Fortune hunters?" Zak asked excitedly.

ForceFlow nodded. "Nespis is full of undiscovered treasures——valuable gems, cargo holds filled with spice, things like that. Treasure hunters come looking for anything valuable."

Hoole had been studying ForceFlow closely. Now he asked, "Why did you want us to meet you here?"

ForceFlow answered without hesitation. "Tash said you were on the run from the Empire." ForceFlow opened his arms. "Look around. This is as far from the Empire as you'll get. The life support systems still function on most areas of the station, and you can even run equipment if you find a live power cable. This is where I hide out from the Empire when things get too dangerous. "

"Is that why you sometimes take so long to answer my HoloNet messages?" Tash asked.

ForceFlow nodded. "Besides, there's something here that may help you defeat your enemies, if you can find it."

"What?" Tash asked.

ForceFlow turned and looked her right in the eye. "The Jedi library."

"You mean it really exists?" she asked. "I thought it was just a legend."

"It *is* a legend," Hoole said firmly.

ForceFlow shrugged. "Nespis is supposed to be a legend too, but you're walking in it right now."

Hoole frowned. "But the Emperor and Darth Vader hunted down all the Jedi and destroyed any mention of them. It is hardly likely that they would have left behind such a valuable thing as a Jedi library."

"Unless they couldn't find it," ForceFlow responded as he made one final turn and entered a wide chamber. "They say it's very well hidden."

"Who says?" Zak asked.

"They do."

He pointed into the chamber. Like the rest of Nespis, the chamber was cast in deep darkness, but unlike the docking bay, this darkness was softened by the dim light of a half dozen glow panels. At one time, the room must have been a large cargo hold, but now it served as the base camp for a small group of interstellar travelers. There were five or six of these little camps, each separated from the others, and each containing the equipment and supplies of one or two fortune seekers. High above, the ceiling had been replaced by a wide bubble of transparasteel. Beyond it, a bright field of stars twinkled, creating a breathtaking scene that equaled the view of any planet's night sky.

"This place is called the solarium," ForceFlow explained. "From here, you can take passageways to almost any part of Nespis 8. Also, what little power is left in Nespis runs through cables in this room. That's why most of the fortune hunters make their camps here."

"Are they friendly?" Tash asked as they approached the fortune hunters' camp.

"Hey, loves!" called out a gray-haired human woman cheerfully, as if answering Tash's question. "Newcomers! Welcome to Nespis 8. What are your names? Where are you from? Say, any chance you passed through Corellia?

That's where I'm from. Name's Domisari of Corellia, but I haven't been back there in months. Haven't even had any news in weeks, and I'd love to hear what's zipping about in the old space lanes. You know what it's like on the treasure trail, never a moment to stop and stare at the stars. So, have you been there?"

Tash and the others just stared at her blankly, not knowing which of her questions to answer first. Domisari burst out

laughing. "Can't keep up with old Domisari, eh?" She winked. "Don't worry, no one can."

"Um, have you been here long?" Tash asked.

"No, no, dears," Domisari laughed. "Only just arrived. I was hunting fire crystals in the No——ad system before this. But I got tired of the heat there, and thought I'd try my hand at hunting up a few antiquities here. Well, anyway, welcome, welcome!" Still chuckling to herself, Domisari wandered back among the piles of storage containers, scanning equipment, and food bins that made up her small camp.

ForceFlow introduced them to a few other fortune hunters. Unlike Domisari, these had been on Nespis for weeks, and even months. They seemed friendly enough, until Zak asked one of them the wrong question.

"So can you tell us how to get to the Jedi library?"

A grizzled, gray-bearded treasure hunter squinted at him. "We don't ask questions like that, lad. My hunt is my hunt, and I don't give clues. If you want to be the one to find the library, go out and look for it yourself." His eyes glittered mischievously. "But do you think you've got the stomach for the search, lad?"

The warning in the old man's voice put Tash on edge. "What do you mean?"

The graybeard cackled. "You mean to tell me you've not heard of the curse? The library's a forbidden place. Meant only for the Jedi, they say. Anyone else who takes a single book, a single leaf of a book, a single word off a page of a single book, is doomed!"

"Really, sir," Deevee stepped in, "I must insist that you not try to frighten my charges."

"It's not me that'll put a fright in 'em," the treasure hunter replied. "It's the truth. Others have come to look for the library, and some say that it's been found. But no one who found the library ever lived to tell of it. For they're all, every last one of 'em, dead."

Tash and Zak both swallowed nervously, but Hoole cast a cold eye at the old man. "If it's so dangerous, why are you here?"

The graybeard cackled again. "That's the spirit! Don't let an old man scare you. There's a fortune to be made here, if you can survive the curse. But I'll tell you this. I'm the closest of this bunch. I'll find the library." He turned away, chuckling to himself.

Zak whistled. "I'd say that guy's a few coordinates off the space lane."

"Don't mind him," ForceFlow said. "These treasure hunters are kind enough, but they're all in competition to find anything valuable on Nespis, especially the library."

"They don't seem that friendly." Zak pointed to another small camp. "Look at that guy."

The camper sat in the midst of his supplies. His body was as thin as a blade, and his face was very long, but his cheeks puffed out and were slightly red. He seemed to be contemplating something private. Then, as if feeling Zak's eyes on him, the man turned his head and looked at them. Tash shuddered. He looked at them as though he was looking at his dinner.

Zak wrinkled his brow. "He looks familiar."

"A newcomer," ForceFlow said. "Like Domisari, he arrived only recently. Come along. I've set up my equipment in a small room right down this hallway."

As ForceFlow guided them down a side passage at the far end of the solarium, Deevee moved up to his side, slipping between him and Tash to ask questions about the history of Nespis 8.

Tash didn't mind. In fact, her feet dragged, and she soon dropped back behind her brother and Uncle Hoole on the way to ForceFlow's quarters. Her whole body felt heavy, as though someone were tugging on her jacket to hold her back.

What's wrong with you? she scolded herself. *You should be thrilled. You've been wanting to meet ForceFlow for months. Now not only have you met him, but he may help you find a secret Jedi library! Snap out of it, Tash.*

Lost in thought, she almost didn't notice when someone tapped her on the shoulder. The tap came again, harder, and Tash turned to see who wanted her attention.

But no one was there.

Chapter Six

Tash blinked.

The passageway was dark.

"Who's there?" she whispered.

The only response was a gentle shift in the air. A cold breeze passed through Tash. She felt it deep in her bones and shivered.

"Who's there?" she whispered again, urgently.

She thought she heard a long, low, mournful moan, but there was no one in the hallway. Zak and the others had followed ForceFlow farther down the passage. She was alone.

Or was she?

"Zak!" she shouted. "Uncle Hoole!"

She ran after them and caught up to them as they turned back in alarm.

"Tash, what's wrong?" the Shi'ido asked.

"Someone tapped me on the shoulder back there," she replied. As she said the words she realized how silly they sounded.

"That's pretty terrifying, Tash," Zak laughed.

"No, I mean, it was someone who wasn't there. I mean... I don't know," she stopped. Her heart was pounding. "I felt someone touch me... then it was almost as if they walked right through me." She shuddered. "But I didn't see anyone."

ForceFlow smiled at her. "Perhaps I can explain. Nespis 8 is a very large station, with hundreds of rooms and hallways. It's so big that it actually has its own weather patterns, like a planet. Some of the rooms have even flooded and become shallow lakes. We get different temperatures, different air currents. Sometimes it feels like someone is breathing down your neck."

"Are you saying what I felt was the *wind*?" Tash asked in surprise.

"Exactly," the man replied.

They reached ForceFlow's quarters——a square room that once must have been a research laboratory. ForceFlow had filled it with computer equipment. Wires and circuit boards were everywhere. "As you can see I haven't had time to set things up properly. I wanted to bring my computer equipment along this time because it's possible we'll be staying for quite a while. Our search could go on for days or weeks."

"Our search?" Hoole asked suspiciously. "Our search for what?"

ForceFlow looked surprised. "Why, the Jedi library, of course."

Hoole furrowed his brow. "Sir, we appreciate your help, but we have some difficulties to deal with. We have no time to chase rumors and legends."

ForceFlow paused a moment, then set his clear blue eyes on Tash. "As Tash can tell you, I specialize in gathering information, so I know all about your troubles. I know that you've discovered this mysterious Project Starscream, and that an evil scientist named Gog is after you. But, believe me, you won't be able to save yourselves or stop Project Starscream without help. And the only thing that can help you now is the vast knowledge contained in the Jedi library."

ForceFlow turned to Hoole. "If half the stories I've heard are true, the library contains information on Jedi teachings that could help you stop Project Starscream, and maybe even rid the galaxy of the Empire forever."

"What about the curse?" Tash asked. "I mean, if all the other parts of the legend are true, what about the part that says Nespis 8 fell to the dark side, and that a Dark Jedi placed a curse on it?"

ForceFlow waived his hand dismissively. "Bantha fodder. Nespis 8 is real, the library is real. The rest is all rubbish."

Hoole touched the long fingers of one hand to his chin as he considered. At last he said, "I am not convinced. But I do agree that this seems to be a good place to hide from the Empire. And I see no reason not to search for this mythical library——as long as it poses no danger for Zak and Tash."

ForceFlow smiled. "I can assure you there is nothing to worry about."

Soon afterward, Hoole excused himself to check on the *Shroud*. Zak, who never missed a chance to work on a starship engine, followed, leaving Deevee behind to watch over Tash. The droid and the girl talked with ForceFlow for a while, but he seemed even more secretive in person than he had been over the HoloNet. Tash guessed that ForceFlow was reluctant to talk in front of anyone he didn't know well. But she was dying to talk to him alone and get to know him better. She turned to her droid companion.

"Deevee, why don't you go back to the *Shroud* and do some research on Nespis 8? It might help us find this Jedi library."

Deevee tilted his silver head. "Tash, I can assure you I have all the information I need stored in my memory banks. My computer brain is quite——"

"I know," she interrupted, "but I think it might be useful to do a little *digging*."

Deevee hesitated, giving the electronic version of a confused blink. But his caretaker program detected no danger. After all, ForceFlow was the person they had come all this way to meet. So the droid said, "Very well," and shuffled away.

Tash turned back to ForceFlow. At last she had a chance to speak to her hero. She tried to find the courage to speak her

mind. "I just wanted to tell you it's a pleasure, I mean... it's an honor to finally meet you."

ForceFlow bowed his head modestly. "I wouldn't call it an honor, Tash. We're all in this fight together."

"But you," she searched for the right words, "you're doing so much. The Emperor nearly wiped the Jedi clean out of history. There must be thousands of others like me, who never would have heard of the Jedi Knights if not for you. "

ForceFlow's eyes twinkled at her. "You would have found out, Tash. Somehow, you would have known. I can tell that about you."

Tash felt herself blush. "How have you managed to keep defying the Empire for so long without getting caught?"

"Just lucky, I guess."

"But you'd have to be a genius to stay one step ahead of the entire Empire. Unless..." she hesitated. "Unless you're working with the Rebels."

Now it was ForceFlow's turn to hesitate. He shifted uncomfortably, then cast her a sly look. "Remember, *you* said that, not me."

Tash grinned.

"But I'm not important, Tash," ForceFlow said sincerely. "You are. From what I know, you and your friends have stumbled onto something very dangerous. This Project Starscream is very top secret stuff. Even I hardly know anything about it, and I've tapped into some high-level information. How did you find out about it?"

Tash began to explain. As she talked, ForceFlow listened with such an open, honest look on his face that she found herself pouring her heart out to him. She told him how the Empire had destroyed their home planet of Alderaan, and how she and Zak had been adopted by Uncle Hoole. ForceFlow seemed particularly interested in why Hoole had taken them on their first mission to the living planet of D'vouran.

"How did he know?" the man asked.

"I don't know," Tash replied. "Back then we didn't know anything was going on. But..." She looked around, as though someone might be listening. She felt terrible for what she was about to say, but she had to tell someone, and ForceFlow was her only confidante. "To tell you the truth, I think there's something mysterious about Uncle Hoole. I mean, he's saved us several times, and I know for sure he's not working with the Empire, but the more I learn about him, the more suspicious I get."

ForceFlow raised an eyebrow. "Like what?"

Tash lowered her voice. "On D'vouran, we met a crime lord who knew Uncle Hoole. Then a bounty hunter named Boba Fett seemed to know about him too. Even Jabba the Hutt knows him!"

"Well, that's no evidence of anything," ForceFlow said softly.

"There's more. Recently, my brother and I got a hold of Hoole's computer files. There are four years missing from his records. No one knows where he was or what he was doing."

"That is unusual." ForceFlow paused. "Maybe it's a good idea to keep an eye on him after all."

Tash shrugged. "I just wish we'd never gotten ourselves caught up in this Project Starscream mess. I wish we were out of it."

"You will be," ForceFlow promised. "Just find that library, and I predict you won't have to worry about a thing."

Tash looked around at the computer equipment piled in ForceFlow's room. "Where do you get your information? You seem to know as much about Project Starscream as we do.

ForceFlow suddenly yawned. "Forgive me. I haven't stopped moving since I arrived here, and I still need to finish setting up my equipment. Perhaps we could finish our discussion later?"

Before Tash could answer, he turned to his machines and began to sort through a thick tangle of computer wire.

Dismissed, Tash left ForceFlow's small chamber and wandered out into the solarium. Zak and Deevee were just returning from the *Shroud*.

"So you finally dragged yourself away from ForceFlow," Zak teased. "What do you think of him?"

Tash shrugged. "He's a lot like I imagined. Mysterious, full of secrets..." Her voice trailed off.

Zak laughed. "Looks like Tash has a crush!"

"I do not!"

"Yeah, then why are you turning red?"

Tash felt her cheeks burning. She changed the subject. "What do *you* think of him?"

Zak shook his head. "He's all right, I guess. I mean, this place is more like a floating tomb than a hideout, but it's still better than being at Jabba the Hutt's place." Zak's eyes lit up. "Jabba the Hutt. That's it!"

"That's what?" Tash asked.

"That's where I know that fortune hunter from. I saw him at Jabba's palace!"

Tash was stunned. "That's impossible!"

"No, it isn't," Zak argued. "He could have followed us."

"I'm afraid Tash is right," Deevee said. "That man obviously arrived before we did. How could he have followed us if he was here ahead of us?"

Zak scowled. "There's only one way to find out," he muttered, and started to walk off.

"Zak, where are you going?" Tash hissed.

Deevee sputtered, "Zak I insist that you..."

But Zak was already on his way to the thin man's camp.

Tash caught up with Zak and followed him the rest of the way. The man was exactly as they had left him, sitting serenely amid his stacks of supplies, his face settled into the hint of a sneer. He looked at them as they approached, but did not greet them.

"Excuse me," Zak said politely, "but I was just telling my sister that you look familiar. Have we ever met?"

The thin man pursed his lips. "No."

"Oh." Zak tapped his forehead, pretending to search for some old memory. "Are you sure? Maybe on a different planet? Somewhere like... Tatooine?"

Silence.

Zak started to fidget under the man's steady glare. Tash jumped in. "Um, okay, maybe not. Sorry to bother you. My name's Tash, Tash Arranda. This is my brother, Zak."

Silence. Then the man's thin lips parted and he spoke two words. "Dannik Jerriko."

"Great. Thanks. Nice to meet you," Tash said, turning away. She could feel Dannik Jerriko's eyes boring into her like laser beams. "Nice going, rancor brain!" she hissed at her brother as they retreated to the other end of the solarium.

"That's him!" Zak whispered back. "He followed us here."

"You're crazy," she insisted. "But even if you're not, so what? If Jabba the Hutt wanted to kill us or Uncle Hoole, he would have done it when we were in his palace. Dannik Jerriko is no threat to us."

Tash said the words with a confidence she didn't really feel. All of her instincts told her that whoever he was, Dannik Jerriko meant them no harm. But she wasn't sure she could trust her instincts anymore. After all, she'd learned the hard way that she wasn't a Jedi and never would be.

Zak shook his head. "Tash, I'm telling you I saw him as clearly as I see him right——" Zak stopped in mid-sentence. He had pointed back toward the thin man's camp, but Dannik Jerriko wasn't there. Zak and Tash stood there in silence, wondering where he had gone.

Then Tash heard Zak mumble something in her ear. "What did you say?" she asked.

Zak looked at her. "I didn't say anything."

Tash furrowed her brow. "Yes, you did. You just mumbled."

Zak rolled his eyes and looked at their droid companion. "Deevee, did you hear me say anything?"

"Not a word," the droid confirmed, "and my auditory sensors are quite well-tuned if I do say so myself."

"Tash, you're getting jumpy," her brother warned. "You're letting this creepy place get to you. Relax. We're hidden from the Empire, and ForceFlow is going to help us. What could possibly go wrong?"

At that moment, a triumphant shout echoed through the halls of Nespis 8. "I found it! I found it! It's mine!" someone roared. The treasure hunters in the solarium looked up, startled. The happy cry bounced off the walls so many times and so loudly that Tash had to cover her ears. Joyful laughter followed, then there was brief moment of silence.

Then the walls began to scream.

Chapter Seven

Tash threw herself on the ground and covered her ears with her hands. The scream seemed to come from all around her. As it finally faded, she realized that what she had heard were the echoes of some terrible cry.

Beside her, Zak had fallen to the ground too. As he struggled to his feet, he whispered, "Wh-What was that?"

The old woman, Domisari, was already out of her little camp and running for one of the many passageways leading from the solarium. "It came from down here!"

By the time Zak, Tash, and Deevee had caught up with her, all the other treasure hunters had joined them, along with ForceFlow and Uncle Hoole. Only Dannik Jerriko was missing. The passageway narrowed, and soon they were hurrying single file down a gangway that zigzagged into the bowels of the space station.

"Are you sure it came from here?" Tash whispered to Domisari. "How could you tell with all those echoes?"

"Good ears," was all the old woman said in reply.

The passageway quickly grew cold. Several of the treasure hunters ignited small glow rods, but it stayed chilly.

"Has anyone ever been down here before?" ForceFlow asked.

All the treasure hunters shook their heads. One said, "Naw, this was Mangol's territory. None of us wanted to come down here. Too cold."

The farther they got from the solarium, the colder it became. Before long, Tash could see her breath in the dim light of the glow rods.

"Watch it!" someone yelled.

A chasm opened before them, its smooth walls broken only by a steep, almost ladder like stairway.

"Ventilator shaft," ForceFlow guessed. "That's why it's so cold here. Watch your step. That shaft could be two kilometers deep. There's no sign of a bottom."

One by one, the group descended the stairs. ForceFlow went first, followed by Domisari and the other treasure hunters. Zak followed, then Tash. Uncle Hoole and Deevee brought up the rear. Tash waited her turn and then slowly walked down, clutching the cold railing, listening as each step made a dull clank on the metal.

The stairs ended at an opening in the wall. Gratefully, lash stepped away from the chasm on the other side of the stairs and toward the light of waiting glow rods. ForceFlow and the other treasure hunters had gathered around something lying on the floor.

"What is it?" Tash asked.

One of the treasure hunters pointed down and said, "Mangol."

The dim light spilled down onto a body. It was the grizzled treasure hunter Zak and Tash had spoken to. He was lying on his back, his face twisted into a mask of horror. His right hand clutched his chest. In his left he held something Tash had only seen in museums. It was a small rectangular object made up of thin leaves bound inside a leather cover.

"What is it?" Zak asked.

"A book," she breathed. "An actual book."

Deevee piped in. "It must be ancient. There has not been a book made in the galaxy in a thousand years."

All writing was done on computers and the texts were stored on data disks. It was far more convenient, but data disks weren't nearly as nice to look at as this antique.

"Do you know what this means?" ForceFlow said excitedly. He caught Tash's eye. "It means Mangol must have found the Jedi library. It must be around here somewhere!"

Hoole grimaced. "That's not important right now. How did he die? What happened?"

Deevee knelt down and examined the body carefully. "There is no evidence of a blaster bolt, or a puncture wound. There are no bite marks. He looks too healthy to have been ill."

"Look at his face," Domisari said. "Something scared him before he died."

Suddenly, Tash grew pale. She remembered the cold feeling of someone touching her, the voice whispering in her ears. If the man had found the Jedi library, she thought she knew why he was dead.

"The curse," she said softly. "It's the dark-side curse placed on the library. That must have killed him." ForceFlow snorted. "A curse! Utter nonsense."

"Then what did kill him?" Domisari asked.

At that moment another figure drifted into the pool of light. "What has happened?"

Startled, the whole group turned to find Dannik Jerriko staring back: at them.

"Someone was just killed," Hoole stated.

Zak's eyes narrowed. "Where were *you*?" he asked.

Dannik blinked. "I was... otherwise occupied. How did he die?"

"We don't know," Hoole answered. "There are no marks of any kind. Deevee, do you have any information on something like this stored in your memory banks?"

The droid paused a moment, summoning up the contents of his computer brain. "Yes, Master Hoole. There are many accounts of mysterious deaths such as this. In each case, the report lists no known cause of death. However..." Deevee paused.

"Yes?" Hoole demanded.

"...many of the reports suggest that the cause of death is the Anzati."

"The Anzati," one of the treasure hunters repeated with a shudder.

The Anzati, Tash thought. They were myths. Legends. No one knew what the Anzati looked like; no one had ever seen one and lived. No one was even sure they existed. But everyone agreed that if they did exist, they were the most terrifying creatures in the galaxy. They were assassins. The Anzati killed but left no mark. Their victims simply died. No one could stop them. No one could escape them.

"Could there be an Anzati on Nespis 8?" Zak asked.

Instead of answering him, Hoole turned to the veteran treasure hunters. "Has anything like this happened before?"

One shook his head. "Not like this. People have disappeared, but Nespis 8 is a huge space station with lots of pitfalls. We always figured that someone just took a wrong step."

Could it have been an Anzati? Tash thought. But even as she did, a chill passed through her, as though someone had touched an ice cube to the back of her neck. Again, she heard a faint whisper in her ear.

No, she thought. *It's not an Anzati. It's not a living thing. It's the curse of the library.*

ForceFlow pointed at the book on the floor. "Well, he's dead and nothing can change that. But look at the book. He must have found the library. It must be around here somewhere!"

Hoole reached down and pried the book from Mangol's stiff fingers. But the minute he did, the ancient book disintegrated into dust that trickled from Hoole's open hand.

"Curious," the Shi'ido mused.

"The book must have been extremely old," ForceFlow guessed. He looked around. "We should search for the library immediately."

Hoole stood up. "I think not. If there is an Anzati around here, we have no way to protect ourselves. I suggest we all return to the solarium for now."

ForceFlow seemed to bristle. Some of the warmth faded from his eyes. "You are not in charge here."

Hoole raised an eyebrow. "Neither are you. I simply suggest we put safety first."

The others agreed, over ForceFlow's objections. Everyone was eager to find the library, but they had all been disturbed by the mention of the mysterious Anzati. If such a creature did exist, no one wanted to be its next victim.

Carefully, they carried Mangol's body back up the narrow stairs to the solarium. They laid his body in his camp and covered it with a spare sheet. Hoole insisted that Tash, Zak, and Deevee return to the safety of the *Shroud* until they knew just how dangerous Nespis was.

By the time she reached her own small cabin, Tash was exhausted. After fleeing the Star Destroyers, visiting Jabba's palace, meeting ForceFlow, and now this——she felt like a great weight was pressing down on her. But she couldn't sleep. She was grateful when her door slid open and Zak slipped into her room.

"Are you thinking about what happened?" he asked. "What else?" she replied.

Zak shook his head. "I think that Dannik Jerriko has something to do with the treasure hunter's death."

Tash sighed. "Okay, Zak. Suppose you're right and Dannik did somehow follow us to Nespis 8, but managed to get here before us. Why would he kill a harmless treasure hunter?"

"I don't know," her brother retorted. "But he was missing when Mangol died. Remember how he showed up so long after

we found the body? Maybe he needed time to circle around so it looked like he'd been behind us all the time."

Tash could only sigh. "I don't know Zak. I don't think it's..." She hesitated.

"What?"

"I think it has something to do with the library."

"Do your *feelings* tell you that?" Zak asked.

"I told you, I don't trust that anymore," she said wearily. "I don't know what those feelings mean."

Zak's eyes softened. In the past, he had made fun of Tash and her interest in the Jedi. Now he felt a twinge of guilt. "Tash, you shouldn't say that. Your feelings have been right before. Remember on D'vouran? You knew something was wrong there."

Tash nodded. "I know, Zak. For a while, I thought I might be——or could be——a Jedi. But now I think that was just a fluke. When we were on Hologram Fun World, I didn't know what was happening even though we were in danger. Now I just feel like I'm going crazy. That's the opposite of what a Jedi is."

Zak shrugged. "Don't worry about it, Tash. This place is gloomy enough to get on a Jedi Master's nerves. Besides, we don't need the Force to figure things out for us. If I'm wrong about Dannik, then we can deal with the library when we find it. But if I'm right, and Dannik *is* killing people, then a dark-side curse may be the last thing we have to worry about."

After Zak left, Tash closed her eyes. She had just started to drift off, her mind relaxing, when...

Tash.

She opened her eyes. Had she heard someone whisper?

Tash.

She sat up. Someone had spoken her name. But her cabin was empty.

Tash.

For a moment, she felt like she was on the verge of sensing something, seeing something beyond the range of her eyes. It

was like suddenly being plugged into a computer that could tap into all the information in the galaxy at once. Or maybe like becoming part of a starship's sensors, reaching out hundreds of light-years into the universe.

This strange sensation suddenly made Tash feel as if she were slipping, falling away into the cosmos. Frightened, her mind slammed shut like a blast shield door. The voice in her head went silent.

Tash sat up and dressed quickly. Had she been dreaming? No, she was sure she hadn't fallen asleep yet. Heart pounding, she pulled on her clothes, put on her jacket, and slipped out of her room. Before she had shut off the message seeping into her brain, she had gotten a single, fleeing image of walls lined with ancient, dusty books.

The Jedi library.

Tash was tiptoeing through the solarium before she even thought about what she was doing. She didn't care if it had been a dream or not. She had something to prove to herself.

She remembered Deevee's words: Only a true Jedi could enter the library and resist the dark-side curse. Finally, she could test herself. She could stop wondering. She would know, once and for all, if she had the makings of a Jedi Knight.

She crept among the containers that marked the treasure hunters' small camps. She could hear them snoring or grumbling in their sleep as she made her way toward the sloping passageway. Moving quietly down the hall, Tash reached the deep ventilation pit. She had brought a small glow rod with her and lit it when she reached the end of the passageway. The light seemed small and weak hanging over the huge chasm.

Tash!

The voice reached her again, so strong and urgent that she nearly slipped over the edge of the pit.

Cautiously, Tash made her way down the narrow stairs until she reached the lower level. She passed over the spot where

Mangol's body had been found and she shuddered. What had killed him? And was it waiting for her?

Despite her fear, Tash pressed on. She wanted to know, she *needed* to know, if she had the making of a Jedi Knight.

Her small glow rod bobbed like a tiny star as she went on into the darkness. As her light drove the darkness away, she found herself facing a wall at the far end of the passage. Just as she was about to turn back in disappointment, she spotted a row of six small, dark squares set into the metal wall. They looked like small maintenance tunnels, the kind humans or repair droids might use to crawl into the skeletal structure of the space station.

Had Mangol gone into one of these tunnels? Which one?

Tash stood before the six openings. One of them surely led to the Jedi library. The others could lead anywhere——she could reach a dead end, or get lost in an endless maze of interconnecting crawlways, or maybe slide down a chute into the depths of the abandoned station.

Tash took a deep breath. If she ever needed the Force, she needed it now.

As she stepped closer to the row of openings, a faint glimmer appeared before the fifth one from the left. A pale thin sliver of white, the opposite of a shadow, flickered in front of the opening, then vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

Tash!

The whisper rolled through her head again. But was it a voice leading her on or warning her to stay away? Tash went with her gut feeling.

She stepped through the fifth hatch and found herself in a long, low tunnel. She could feel her heart jump higher into her throat with each step. She was sure it was the right tunnel. She was sure that Mangol had come this way.

Fortunately, there were no more choices to make. The tunnel plunged straight through the heart of Nespis 8. At any moment, Tash expected it to open up into a fabulous chamber lined with thousands of ancient Jedi manuscripts.

Instead, the tunnel stopped.

A dead end. Tash thrust her glow rod forward to make sure she wasn't mistaken. The light showed her nothing but a cold gray metal wall.

"No, no, no," Tash muttered. She'd been wrong after all. She hadn't chosen the right tunnel.

In frustration, Tash slapped her hand against the durasteel wall before her and turned back——only to hear a soft click and the whir of machinery behind her. Tash turned around.

The wall had vanished, sliding back into a hidden recess. She was looking at another stretch of tunnel. Twenty or thirty meters ahead, the darkness gave way to gray light.

She had found it.

Tash hurried forward, her fear replaced by excitement. At the end of this tunnel she blinked for a moment in a stream of white light that spilled in from a high-ceilinged chamber beyond.

She stepped into the light. As her eyes adjusted, she saw a large circular room. The walls were lined with hundreds of shelves, and on the shelves were rows and rows of ancient, dust-covered books. Two antique tables made of carved wood stood in the center of the room, with sturdy wooden chairs beside them.

I found it, she told herself. I found it!

In the midst of her own wonder, Tash heard the voice that had awakened her. But this time it did not whisper. It roared around her, loud, harsh, and full of rage.

GET OUT!

Chapter Eight

Tash screamed.

She couldn't help herself. The angry voice came from all around her, striking her with the force of a punch in the stomach. But there was no one in the room. As the echoes of her scream faded down the long passageways, Tash was still looking around with wide, frightened eyes. She felt another wave of cold air wash over her, but this time a sensation entered her bones along with the chill. Fear.

Terrified, she backed away from the cursed room. But she was too slow. She felt the icy cold wave pass through her again. It was so strong that it overwhelmed her senses, and everything went black.

Tash woke to the feeling of a warm hand holding her own. Slowly, she opened her eyes, and blinked in the light of several portable glow panels. The bright light made a halo around ForceFlow's gently smiling face.

"You'll be all right," he said softly. "Just relax."

She tried to speak, but fear seemed to have choked the words out of her. She knew she had to warn the others about the curse, but all she managed to rasp out was "Hoole."

"I sent for him," ForceFlow said. "Your friends were in their ship. They'll be here any minute——"

"I'm here," said Hoole's sharp voice as the Shi'ido appeared next to ForceFlow.

Like Mangol's cry earlier, Tash's voice had echoed up through the metal walls of the space station. ForceFlow and the treasure hunters had come running when he'd heard her. Hoole was visibly relieved to see that his niece was safe.

"Tash, what are you doing down here?" he demanded.

Zak was right behind him. "Are you all right?"

ForceFlow stopped all conversation. "By the Force! She found it!"

He pointed down the tunnel, where the entrance to the library was still visible.

"No, no!" Tash yelled, grabbing ForceFlow's arm. "Don't go down there! It's cursed. It's haunted!"

ForceFlow raised an eyebrow. "It's what?"

"There was a voice. There was no one there, but something shouted at me. But there was a..." She didn't know how to describe it. "It was like a wave of fear."

"Tash, calm down," said ForceFlow, his blue eyes twinkling at her. "The most important thing right now is that you've done something no one else has been able to do. You've found the Jedi library!"

"Mangol found it," Tash muttered, "and he's dead."

ForceFlow frowned. "True, but I'm sure that had nothing to do with the library itself."

"It did," she said dejectedly. "The legend says that only a true Jedi can break through the dark-side curse. The treasure hunter wasn't a Jedi, and"——she took a deep breath——"and neither am I."

Hoole put a gentle hand on Tash's shoulder.

Beside Hoole, Deevee said in the warmest voice his program could manage, "Tash, if that really is a Jedi library, then it would be the greatest galactic discovery in a hundred years."

Tash shook her head stubbornly. "I don't care. That place is dangerous. I'm not going back there."

Hoole's black eyes studied his niece for a moment, then the Shi'ido nodded. "Very well. We'll return to the *Shroud* to make sure you're all right. Then we can discuss our next step."

ForceFlow disagreed. "You said yourselves that Gog is after you. In the library——with all the knowledge it contains——you might find a way to stop him. You're wasting valuable time."

The Shi'ido shrugged. "Our decision is made."

A dark cloud passed over ForceFlow's handsome face but he said nothing. The others, however, were not so silent.

Domisari said she would return to the solarium as well, but the other two treasure hunters were reluctant to leave.

"We've been searching for the library for weeks," one of them said, "and we can't just walk away from it now."

Hoole returned to the solarium with Zak, Tash, and Deevee. Instead of entering the library himself, ForceFlow followed them to the upper levels.

"Just think of it," ForceFlow was saying as they reached the solarium. "Twenty thousand years of Jedi lore are stored in that one room. Think of the secrets those books must contain! All the mysteries of the universe may be answered there."

Hoole stopped short. "I hope you are right, ForceFlow," he said. He pointed toward the pile of cargo containers that had marked the boundaries of Mangol's camp. "Because we now have another mystery to solve. Mangol's body is gone."

They all followed Hoole's long, bony finger. The Shi'ido was right. The body of the treasure hunter had disappeared.

Deevee asked the obvious question. "Who would have taken a corpse? And why?"

Looking around, Zak asked a question no one had considered. "Where is Dannik Jerriko?"

The others could not answer. They realized that Jerriko had not come when Tash screamed. And he wasn't here now. "I'm telling you, he's up to something, " Zak insisted. "I'll bet he killed Mangol and now he's removed the evidence."

Tash was about to insist that there was no murderer, but before she opened her mouth, another cry drifted mournfully through the space station. It was followed by another, desperate, scream for help. The small group in the solarium looked at one another and every face grew pale.

They all knew what they would find at the library. The two treasure hunters were dead.

Chapter Nine

Only a few people were left on Nespis 8 now. Aside from Hoole, Zak, Tash, and Deevee, ForceFlow still remained, as well as the old woman Domisari, and the mysterious Dannik Jerriko.

The next day, after finally getting some sleep, everyone gathered outside the library.

No one believed Tash's story of an evil curse, but no one wanted to enter the chamber. Something was killing people, and none of them wanted to become the next victim. Only Deevee, because he was a droid, could enter. Tash and Zak hovered near the door as the droid entered the room and, careful not to touch them, examined the two bodies, which sat slumped at tables in the center of the library.

"There are no marks," the droid announced as he stepped away from the corpses.

"It's as though the life had been stolen right out of them," ForceFlow mused. "Perhaps it *is* the work of the Anzati."

"It's the curse," Tash whispered.

Hoole frowned. "So far our only suggestions are a mythical species of killers and ancient dark-side magic. There must be a more logical explanation, and I know where to look for it."

The survivors formed a small circle in the solarium with Dannik Jerriko in the center. The narrow-faced man calmly studied his suspicious companions.

"This is ridiculous," Dannik was saying. "Do you truly think I have killed those pathetic fools? You might as well believe this girl's fear of a dark-side curse."

"We do not know what to believe," Hoole replied. "All we know is that three people are dead, and that you were missing when each of them died. And, again, when Mangol's body was stolen, you were the only one missing."

Dannik blinked very slowly. "This is a civilized Empire. There are laws, and this is not a court. You can't accuse me."

Hoole's voice was as cold as steel. "We are on the very edge of civilization. I have two young humans under my protection, and I intend to protect them by any means necessary."

Dannik locked eyes with Hoole. "Do not threaten me." Hoole's gaze did not waver. "That is not a threat." Suddenly, the Shi'ido's entire body seemed to quiver. The skin seemed to crawl across his frame, and a moment later, Hoole had vanished. In his place stood a tall, shaggy Wookiee, who flexed and unflexed the claws of one massive hand. When the Wookiee spoke, its voice growled, but it still sounded like Hoole. "It is a promise," he said.

The fact that Hoole was a shapechanger made most people nervous. When he changed into something ferocious, most people quickly backed down. But Dannik seemed to become excited. His eyes flashed, and for a moment Tash thought he was going to attack Hoole. But then Dannik yawned and said, "Very well. You may threaten or promise or whatever you like, but the fact remains I did not kill those people."

"Then where were you when the murders took place?" Hoole growled, still in Wookiee form.

Dannik smiled coldly. "Come with me."

Hoole melted back into his own shape and Dannik led them to a small chamber just outside the solarium. At first Tash found nothing unusual about the square room, except for a strong smell

of burning leaves. Then she noticed that one corner of the little room was covered with a thin layer of ashes.

Dannik produced a long, thin reed from his vest pocket——a pipe. "I confess that I have acquired a rather unpleasant habit. I smoke t'bac. Although I find the habit detestable myself, I have been unable to quit. In order to hide this personal failure, I prefer to smoke in private." He waited.

Zak squinted his eyes. "Are you saying you were *smoking* during the murders?"

Dannik raised the pipe to his mouth and lit it with a small laser lighter. "That is exactly what I'm saying."

Deevee's photoreceptors glowed as they scanned the ash-covered floor. "Master Hoole, there is a significant ash layer here. It would take quite a bit of smoking to produce this amount. I am inclined to say that this man is telling the truth."

"But——" Zak started to say.

"It seems," Hoole interrupted, "that we owe you an apology."

"Indeed," Dannik said stiffly. Without waiting for another word, he slipped past the others and returned to the solarium.

Zak and Tash watched Hoole and the others file out of the small room.

"But Tash," Zak said in a low voice, "if Dannik's not the killer, then who is?"

"I think I know," replied a voice. It was Domisari. Her face was full of excitement. "Meet me in fifteen minutes on the lower level, just outside the tunnel to the library. And don't tell anyone——not even your uncle!" Then she slipped away.

"What was that all about?" Zak groaned.

"I don't know, but I'm not sure we should go," Tash said. Her stomach had twisted into knots as soon as Domisari had spoken.

Her brother shrugged. "Have you got any better ideas?"

"Yes," she argued, "we could tell Uncle Hoole what she said, and tell him to come with us."

Zak scoffed. "Uncle Hoole would tell us we were being foolish."

With that, Zak headed for the passage to the lower levels. "Zak!" Tash whispered after him. But her only answer was the hissing echo of her own voice.

She caught up to him at the edge of the huge ventilation shaft. Zak shivered. "I still don't get this coldness. If there were no power at all it would be even colder——like deep space. This is more like... a refrigeration unit."

"Or an air conditioner," Tash added. "This is a ventilation shaft, remember."

Zak shook his head. "Yeah, but there's not enough power in the space station to generate climate control."

"Can we worry about one thing at a time?" Tash snapped. "Come on, if we're going to do this, let's get it over with."

She did not like the idea of going near the library again. She was afraid of the curse, but even more than that, every step reminded her of the voice that had yelled at her to get out.

No one was waiting for them outside the tunnel to the library.

Zak looked to his sister. "Where do you suppose Domisari could be?"

"Maybe just late," Tash suggested hopefully. Zak nodded halfheartedly.

They waited for five minutes, and then ten. The darkness seemed to crowd in around them. Once, Tash swore she thought she saw something floating just outside the circle of their light. It looked like fog. It was gone as soon as it appeared.

Finally her nerves got the better of her. "I can't stand just waiting here," she whispered. "Maybe Domisari meant that we should meet her *inside* one of the tunnels."

"That's not what she said," Zak argued.

"Well, she's not here. Besides, you're the one who wanted to come down here. So if we're going to talk with her, we should at least find her and get it over with. Come on.

Wanting to stay far away from the fifth tunnel that led to the library, Tash turned to the first passageway. "Maybe she's waiting down here."

The two Arrandas had traveled a few meters inside the tunnel when they heard the faint echo of footsteps behind them. They stopped and listened for a moment. Then a soft voice drifted through the darkness.

"Children... children..."

It was Domisari. They could see her approaching the tunnels. In one hand she held a glow rod. In her other hand gleamed an object made of black metal.

Tash was just about to call out to the old woman when a shadowy figure darted into Domisari's circle of light. The figure slammed into her with a jarring thud. The old woman grunted in surprise as she was shoved outside the circle of light and swallowed up by the surrounding darkness. Something clattered to the ground as sounds of a struggle reached them from the shadows.

"What happened?" Tash whispered as they stepped out of the tunnel. "Where are they?"

"There!" Zak said, pointing toward movement in the gloom.

Tash thrust the glow rod forward and gasped.

What she saw horrified her. A fallen blaster lay on the ground and over it, Dannik Jerriko and Domisari were locked in a struggle. Dannik was holding Domisari's head between his hands, and pressing his own face close to hers. There was a look of terror on Domisari's face.

And she saw something even more horrible.

Two small holes opened up in Dannik's cheeks. Out of each hole slithered a long, wriggling tendril. As Tash and Zak watched, the tendrils wormed their way across the short space that separated him from Domisari. They jabbed into her nostrils and crawled upward into her brain.

Chapter Ten

Domisari was dead before her body hit the ground. Her lifeless corpse fell into a heap at Dannik Jerriko's feet as the killer turned to face the two Arrandas. They watched in horror as the two tendrils retracted. The tendrils were sucked back into the killer's cheeks and vanished, leaving no marks on his skin.

Tash swallowed. "Zak, you were right."

"No visible marks," Zak whispered, remembering Deevee's story about the Anzati. He looked at Dannik. "You-You *are* an Anzati."

"Wait," Dannik warned, "it's not what you think. He took a step forward.

Zak and Tash turned and ran for their lives.

Blindly, they plunged into the first tunnel.

"Stop!" Dannik's voice called from behind. "Let me explain!"

They had seen Dannik kill Domisari in a matter of seconds without leaving a mark. They had looked into the eyes of one of the galaxy's most frightening species. That same creature now chased them down the tunnel.

An Anzati was after them.

"Y-You were right," Tash panted without slowing down.

"Remind me," her brother gasped as he ran in front of her, "to be wrong next time!"

Unlike the tunnel to the library, this one crisscrossed with a dozen other passageways. Zak and Tash could have used them to lose their pursuer, but they didn't want to get lost so they continued sprinting straight ahead. They had just begun to put distance between them and Dannik when they were pulled up short.

Another dead end.

"What do we do?" Zak said.

Tash could hear soft footfalls approaching them. She pictured the thin tendrils wriggling out from Dannik's cheeks, and shuddered.

"There was a secret door at the end of the other tunnel. Maybe there's one here too!"

She started pounding on the walls. Zak joined in, and together they banged at the metal walls with both fists.

But this time there was no secret door. The tunnel simply came to an abrupt halt. There was only a small metal grate set into the wall about waist high.

"Let's get the grate off!" Tash urged. The opening looked big enough for them to fit through.

The grating was as old as the rest of Nespis 8. When they both wrapped their fingers in it and pulled, the metal screen came off with a groan.

A putrid smell rose up from the hole in the wall. "Ugh! Smells like garbage!" Zak groaned.

"There's nowhere else to go!" Tash hissed. "Get in!" Wrinkling his nose, Zak scrambled into the hole, and vanished.

The footsteps were closer. Tash followed her brother and wriggled her way into the opening. The vent traveled straight ahead for a meter, and then sloped sharply downward. Before Tash could stop herself, she was sliding down a metal chute, picking up speed as she went. She tried to brace herself against the walls of the chute, but they were too smooth. Suddenly she was launched into the air, then she splashed headfirst into a pool of thick, stinking slime.

Zak helped her up as she sputtered and coughed out a mouthful of stagnant water. They were standing knee-deep in a pool of liquid. Chunks of various objects——some hard like metal, some soft and squishy like old vegetables——floated around them. Tash took a breath and nearly gagged——the room smelled like something had been rotting there for centuries.

Tash listened. "I don't hear anything. I don't think he's followed us."

"Can't say I blame him. The smell down here could put a bantha on its back." Zak waded toward the nearest wall. "Let's find an exit and get back to the solarium. We need to warn Uncle Hoole about Dannik."

Like everything else on Nespis, the garbage pit they had fallen into seemed immense. They splashed across the wide pool, wading around small hills of refuse as they used Tash's small, handheld glow rod to search for a way out.

As they struggled through the garbage-filled water, Tash began to feel uncomfortable——the way she felt when someone was staring at her. She looked around, but no one was there but Zak. Still, she could feel eyes boring into her.

Suddenly, Zak stopped. "Watch where you're stepping," he said.

Tash blinked. "What do you mean?"

"You just bumped your leg against mine," her brother said.

"No, I didn't."

Zak paled. "Well, something did."

Uuuuhhhhhrrrrr.

The moan was low and distant, muffled by the pool of slime. They heard a distant splash, and then the *plunk* of something dipping back into the water.

Tash felt her heart bang against her ribs. "We're not alone in here."

She held up her hand so her small light would reach farther. "There!" Zak said, jabbing his finger.

Tash turned her head and caught a glimpse of a single eye, resting on a thick stalk. The eye gleamed wetly as it studied them, then dropped quickly into the water. "Dianoga," Tash breathed.

Dianogas were one-eyed, many-tentacled water creatures that lived in lakes and stagnant pools. Because they were scavengers, they could sometimes be found in the cesspools and sewer systems of planetside towns or large space stations, living off whatever was dumped into the garbage system.

Even if what was dumped was alive.

"Let's find an exit, fast!" Tash urged.

They quickly splashed across the wide pool. Ahead, they could see one wall of the large pit, and a small doorway half hidden by the gloom.

"There," Tash said, "we can get out th——"

Her next words were cut off as she was dragged down into the slimy water.

Chapter Eleven

At first Tash thought a piece of rope or cable had wrapped around her ankle. But as she was pulled under, she knew that the dianoga had her. One of its powerful tentacles had looped around her leg.

Tash managed to get her head above water, where she took in a lungful of air. Then she was dragged down again. Another tentacle slithered up her body and wrapped itself around her shoulder and neck, pinning her down.

The dianoga was trying to drown her in the shallow water.

Tash tore at the ropelike limb that held her, but the dianoga was far too strong. Her lungs started to burn.

"Tash, Tash!" Zak cried desperately. He had seen where she went down. He looked around desperately for a weapon and saw a long piece of durasteel pipe. It had been snapped in two, leaving a sharp, jagged edge. Snatching it up, Zak pressed the sharp edge against one of the dianoga's tentacles and began to saw at the tough, slimy flesh.

The single eye popped up from the surface a few meters from Zak to see what was attacking it. It stared at him coldly, studying its next meal. Then it plopped back below the water.

"Let's try that again," Zak growled.

He sawed at the tentacle some more and waited. "Come on, come on!" he urged. Tash couldn't hold out much longer. She was thrashing desperately.

Now Zak tried to pry the tentacle away. Again, the eye stalk shot up from beneath the water. This time, Zak was ready. Quick as lightspeed, he pulled the pipe free and swung with all his might. The metal tube smashed into the eye stalk, putting out its light.

A squeal rose up from somewhere beneath the slime. The tentacles suddenly flailed loose, splashing and flopping in the stagnant pool. Zak grabbed his sister by the jacket collar and hauled her to her feet. Tash came up gasping and sputtering for breath, her body and clothes soaked with the scummy fluid.

"Now's our chance!" Zak said, darting forward.

"Wait!" Tash blurted. She pulled him back. She had only been a few seconds away from drowning and she had no desire to be pulled under again. She remembered something Deevee had taught them. "Some water creatures are attracted by big movements, like splashes. We should try to go slow."

Zak agreed. Holding on to one another for support, they took slow, soft steps toward the door. They raised their feet gently out of the slime, and then softly put them back down, taking careful steps. It was nearly impossible, knowing that the dianoga was out there somewhere waiting to grab them. The urge to run was almost irresistible.

"This is driving me crazy," Zak muttered.

"Stay with it," Tash whispered. "I think it's working."

Uuuhhhhrrrrr. A low growl rose up from the water again. They heard the plink, plink of moving water and saw several tentacles wriggling about, searching for them. The single eye rose up above the water, but it blinked continuously and had filled with a bluish haze.

"That's one big black eye," Zak boasted. "I don't think it can see us."

"It can't find us," Tash said softly. "Just keep moving slowwwww..."

One of the tentacles swept toward them, but didn't reach far enough. Walking gently and patiently, Zak and Tash reached the door, a hatch set into the wall. They opened the hatch and quickly climbed out, then slammed the door behind them, locking the dianoga in the garbage pit.

"Are you all right?" Zak asked his sister.

Tash shuddered, and tried to wipe the slime from her face and neck. "I think so. Just a little slimy. Thanks for saving me."

Zak grinned. "What are brothers for? C'mon, let's find a way out of here. "

The passageway they were in was plain and unmarked, giving no hint as to where they might be. They knew they were deep inside Nespis now, well below the solarium and even farther down than the library level. Both Tash and Zak felt a cool draft flowing from their right.

"The ventilation shaft," Tash guessed. "It must be that way."

They hurried down the corridor. After a few minutes, they could see that it opened up into a wider room.

"Maybe that's the ventilation shaft," Zak said. "Then we can find the stairs and climb back up to the solarium."

The reached an opening, but it did not lead to the ventilation shaft. Instead, the corridor widened to a gallery like the one leading to the library.

But this one was full of bodies.

Chapter Twelve

The bodies were stored in rows inside large containers made of transparasteel and metal. Each container leaned against a wall and held one body. The tanks were surrounded by pipes and wires leading to a bank of computer equipment at the far end of the room. Inside each container, a cloud of mist covered the bodies like a fog.

Cautiously, they crept toward the closest of the tanks. Through its transparent walls, they could see the person inside. It was a human man——pale and lifeless. He wasn't breathing.

"Is... is he...?" Zak started to ask.

"I think so," Tash answered. She shivered. "It's cold here."

Cautiously, Zak approached one of the containers and touched the transparasteel. He jerked his hand away. "These containers are freezing. I think they're cryogenically sealed."

"Cryo what?" Tash asked. She was smart, but every once in a while her techno-loving brother came up with a word she didn't know.

"Cryogenically," he repeated. "It means the bodies are frozen so that they don't decay. Somebody is *preserving* these bodies for some reason." He exhaled and watched his breath appear in a thin fog. "This must be where the cold is coming from, not the ventilation shaft"

Tash took a few cautious steps toward one of the containers. "But what's this storage room doing in an abandoned space station? And who are these people?" she wondered. "Could this be left over from ancient times?"

Zak examined the wires and cables that ran toward the far end of the room. "I don't think so. This machinery looks brand new. Look at that."

Atop the computers at the far end of the room stood a large crystal globe. Inside, lights swirled and bobbed. The whole crystal glowed.

Zak said, "That thing doesn't look ancient. I'd say someone set up this equipment recently."

"And these people," Tash added. "The treasure hunters mentioned that people disappeared from Nespis 8 once in a while, but they thought the missing people either left or got lost. Maybe they're here! Someone's been *collecting* them."

"Dannik Jerriko," Zak guessed.

Tash shook her head. "No way. All the treasure hunters said he was a recent arrival. He couldn't have built all this equipment. But who did——and why?"

Zak looked at one of the bodies. "It reminds me of Necropolis." Zak had had a terrifying experience on the planet Necropolis——he'd been buried alive. He shuddered to remember it. "Well, at least we solved one mystery. We know that Dannik is the killer. You saw what he did to Domisari?"

Tash nodded, but she wasn't really paying attention. Something had distracted her, a faint whispering in her head, like someone talking from a great distance.

"I hope this convinces you that there's no dark-side curse," Zak continued. "Not that we're any better off, because I think Dannik is an Anzati, which means we're all in danger unless we can get to Uncle Hoole..."

Zak's words faded from Tash's ears. The whispering in her head had deepened and slowed to a murmur, the same whisper she had heard earlier. Only now it sounded more urgent.

Another wave of cold fear washed over her. She steeled herself, trying to make sense of the voice. She took a deep breath to calm her tightening stomach, and focused on the voice.

...get out...get out...get out...

Tash concentrated. It was like trying to pick one voice out of a crowded room where everyone was talking. The voice grew clearer.

...get out...get out...get out...

It was the same voice Tash had heard in the library. "Do you hear that?" she whispered to her brother.

Zak looked around. "Hear what?"

"That voice!"

"I don't hear anything." Zak noticed the tense look on his sister's face. "Tash? This place is as quiet as a lifeless moon."

Tash frowned. Why couldn't Zak hear it? The voice was all around them now, and it grew louder and stronger as she continued to focus.

GET OUT! GET OUT! GET OUT!

A voice can't hurt me, she told herself. A voice can't hurt me.

But what happened next hurt her a great deal.

There was no one near her, but Tash felt something brush against her neck. Just as she reached up to brush away whatever had touched her, two cold hands clamped down on her throat.

Chapter Thirteen

Tash struggled against the hands wrapped around her neck, but the grip was unbreakable. She was being choked.

"Tash?" Zak said, as his sister clutched at her throat.

Zak! Help! Tash wanted to scream. Couldn't he see that someone was choking her? But she couldn't even breathe, let alone call for help.

With all her strength, Tash turned herself around. No one was there.

The grip on her throat tightened.

Tash reached out desperately to her brother. As Zak stepped toward her, Tash felt the grip on her throat drive her backward. She was being pushed toward the wall.

"GETOUTGETOUTGETOUT!"

The voice roared in her ears. Tash braced herself to be crushed against the durasteel wall.

Instead, the moment she hit the wall it gave way, revealing a secret passage like the one that led to the library. GETOUT! GETOUT! GETOUT! Tash felt herself shoved hurriedly up the dark passage for twenty meters before she was suddenly dropped to the ground. The voice stopped.

Dizzy, Tash fought to get to her knees, and used the wall to brace herself as she tried to stand. She had reached her feet just as Zak came running up the tunnel.

"What was that?" he cried. "Are you all right?"

Tash shook her head. "No. None of us are. We're all in danger!" She told Zak about the voice that screamed in her ears, and the hands that gripped her throat.

"I didn't hear anything, Tash," her brother insisted. "And I'm telling you there's no curse. Dannik Jerriko killed those people."

"Then what grabbed me and pulled me twenty meters along this hallway?" she demanded.

Zak pointed back toward the morgue. "Maybe that place has an automatic defense system. It could have been a repulsor unit like the ones that power starships. Only this one was designed to push intruders out of the room."

"Come on, Zak——"

But Zak wouldn't let her argue. "Tash, we can talk about this later. Whatever happened, at least we found a way out of the morgue. We need to get back before Dannik kills anyone else!"

Tash agreed, and together they hurried along the tunnel, which curved upward.

Having gone down the stairs to the library level, and then sliding down farther to the garbage pit, Zak and Tash figured they were two levels below the solarium. They followed the passage upward for several hundred meters before it began to curve sharply to the right.

Zak set a fast pace. But Tash lagged behind, frightened. She could feel invisible eyes watching her from the dark——but it wasn't the same as when the dianoga had stalked them. Tash knew instinctively that these were not the eyes of a beast or a being. They were the eyes of whatever haunted the halls of Nespis 8. They were the eyes of whatever had grabbed her and thrown her out of that room.

"I think we've got a problem," Zak said.

Tash tore herself from her own thoughts. They had reached the end of the passage. Like the other passageways, this one ended at the ventilation shaft. But this time there was no stairway leading up or down——only a tiny ladder made of rails that had been welded into the side of the huge shaft.

Zak looked into the darkness above and below them. Then he pointed across the chasm. "I think that's the library across the way. That means we're only one level below the solarium, but on the wrong side. We could climb up, but I don't know how we'll get across."

"Okay," Tash said weakly. She wasn't afraid of heights and she didn't mind climbing. But she could still feel those powerful hands on her neck. If the spirit that haunted Nespis 8 decided to attack her while she was on that ladder, she knew that it was a long way to the bottom of the shaft.

Zak pulled himself out onto the ladder, and Tash slipped out behind him. Hand over hand they climbed up into the darkness. Tash's grip on the ladder rungs felt loose and slippery with her own nervous sweat. Halfway up the ladder, something tugged at her jacket and she shrieked, clutching at the rungs. But it was only a cold draft blowing up from the depths below.

Calm down, she told herself. This isn't the way a Jedi would behave.

But I'm not a Jedi, she thought. If I were, I could have entered the library.

After what felt like an eternity of climbing, they reached a small platform anchored to the solarium level.

"Keep your eyes and ears open," Zak warned. "Dannik could be around here anywhere."

Zak led the way down the passage. "It's hard to tell in the dark, but this hallway looks like it links up with the corridor between the docking bay and the solarium. Let's go.

His sense of direction proved true. Only a few dozen meters down the hallway, they reached an intersection. To the right, they could see the darkness give way to the gray light of the solarium. That meant the docking bay was in the opposite direction.

They turned left and hurried through the darkness until they reached the huge docking bay. The pitch-black cavern was lit only by the running lights of the *Shroud*.

"Uncle Hoole! Deevee!" they called out before they had even reached the ship.

There was no answer.

Zak punched in the code that opened the ship's hatchway, and they scurried inside.

The ship was deserted.

Zak swallowed. "Maybe they're in the solarium."

The Arrandas hurried back to the transparent-domed room. But there was no one there either. They even found their way to ForceFlow's private chamber, but he too had vanished.

Zak and Tash were both worried. Had Dannik gotten to everyone? Was he lying in wait for them?

"There's only one place left to check," Zak said quietly. "We shouldn't go down there," Tash insisted. "I'm telling you, there's a curse."

"We *have* to look," her brother argued. "Uncle Hoole might be there." He waited for his sister to decide. After a long pause, she finally nodded.

For Tash, every step toward the Jedi library was like trudging through fear. The air she breathed was heavy and thick, and her mouth was dry as the sands of Tatooine. But she forced herself to put one foot in front of the other until they reached the library. Just beyond the open doorway, they could hear someone moving around the room.

Zak's face brightened with relief and he rushed forward. "Uncle Hoole! Deevee, we——"

He stopped short. Hoole and Deevee were indeed in the library. But Deevee lay sprawled on the floor, deactivated, and Hoole sat slumped over a book, unmoving.

And over him stood Dannik Jerriko.

Chapter Fourteen

"Murderer!" Zak cried.

Dannik Jerriko's face was unreadable. "That is true," he said. "I am indeed a killer. But I did not kill your uncle."

"Liar!" Zak replied with poison in his voice. "You've killed five people! "

A look of mild irritation crossed the killer's face. "I am an Anzati. In my lifetime I have killed many, many more people than that. But here, on Nespis 8, I have killed only one."

Zak had run into the room and knelt by Hoole. Tash looked on from the edge of the library. She wanted to run to Uncle Hoole but she still could not bring herself to step into the room. A barrier of solid fear blocked her path.

"So you are an Anzati," her brother said. "And you followed us here from Jabba the Hutt's palace, didn't you?"

Dannik nodded. The tiny tendrils poked out of their hidden pockets in his cheeks, then retreated. "I was there. I was hired to reach Nespis 8 before you."

"Who hired you?" Tash asked.

Dannik said nothing.

She tried again. "Why did you kill Domisari?"

"I was hired to save you from another hired assassin," the Anzati replied.

Zak nearly choked. "*Save* us?"

The Anzati pursed his lips. "Apparently, someone high up in the Empire hired an assassin to track you down. I was hired to kill the assassin before she got to you. But I was unsure of her identity and had to wait. I got to her right before she shot you."

Tash's head was spinning. "You're saying that Domisari was a hired assassin, and that she was going to kill us?"

Dannik nodded. "That was my assignment, and I have fulfilled it. I was just about to leave when I heard something down in the library. I found the Shi'ido and the droid here just before you arrived. There are no signs of life."

As Tash cursed herself for her own fear, Zak put his hand on Hoole's wrist. "It's cold," he whispered. "He's not breathing."

He knelt down next to Deevee and opened a small panel in the droid's chest. "Deevee's not hurt——he's just been shut down!" Zak quickly adjusted a few switches in the droid's master control circuitry. There was a soft hum, and light suddenly flooded the photoreceptors in the droid's human——like face.

"Oh, oh, oh no!" Deevee cried. "Master Hoole!"

The droid scrambled to his feet and looked around, disoriented. "Zak, Tash, thank the Maker you're all right! Is Master Hoole——"

Tash could hardly bring herself to say the words. "I-I think he's dead. Deevee, what happened?"

The droid shook his metallic head. "I can't say exactly. When Master Hoole and I realized that you two were missing, we thought you might have come to the library. Once we were here, Master Hoole became intrigued by the books. He opened one... and... I remember sensing a powerful force that caused me to short circuit and...and...that's the last thing in my memory banks."

Zak frowned. "What about Dannik? Don't you have any memory of him?"

The droid looked at the murderer. "None whatsoever. I'm sure he wasn't here."

"It is as I said," the Anzati stated.

"This library is cursed," Tash said softly. "No one should have found it—— ever. Now it's taken Uncle Hoole. We need to get out of here."

Dannik pursed his lips. "If you will excuse me, my own ship is waiting."

The Anzati strode to the door. Tash avoided his touch as the killer slipped past her. "Wait!" Zak called. "Aren't you going to help us?"

The mysterious Anzati did not turn around as he sneered. "I am of the Anzati. We do not *help*." He vanished into the darkness.

The three companions stood frozen in place for a moment. Finally, Tash roused herself to speak. "What——What do we do?"

Deevee's caretaker programming kicked in. He knew that his priority was to make sure the Arrandas were safe. He said, "We must get Master Hoole's body back to the ship, and then leave here as soon as possible."

"What about ForceFlow?" Tash wondered out loud. "Where has he been?"

"I have not seen him since we were all together. I fear that he, too, has fallen victim to this place."

Zak gently tried to lift Uncle Hoole's head from its place on the table. The Shi'ido's gray face sagged, pale and lifeless. He had fallen across one open book that he must have pulled from the shelves. Another book was clutched in his stiff, lifeless hand.

Zak accidentally brushed his hand across the book as he tried to lift Hoole, and it immediately turned to dust. The other book, still closed, was locked in Hoole's grip. Zak reached to pry it loose.

A warning cry shot through Tash's mind like an alarm bell. *No!*

"No!" she repeated aloud.

Too late. Zak pulled the book free. As he did, the leather-bound cover of the book opened. A blinding flash of light exploded like a supernova, turning the entire room white. Tash shielded her eyes.

When the light finally faded, Tash blinked away stars and tears from her eyes.

Zak lay in a crumpled, lifeless heap.

Chapter Fifteen

"No!" Tash cried out again.

She forgot her fear. Her uncle and her brother, the last two members of her family, had just been struck down. She charged forward.

But as she did so, something melted out of the wall on the opposite side of the library. It was a ghostly figure, with almost no shape, just a ball of milky gray energy rolling through the air. As it floated toward her, two hands reached out of the center of the energy mass.

Tash yelled again. "Get away!"

"Tash?" Deevee knelt by Zak's lifeless body. The droid looked at her quizzically. "What is it?"

"Deevee, help! It's coming for me!" The ghostly image came nearer, the hands reaching once more for her throat.

"Tash, my sensors tell me that there's nothing alive in this room but the two of us."

"It's here! It's here!" She turned to run. "Deevee, come on!"

Confused, the droid did not move. He rechecked his sensors and found them in working order. He scanned the room again, pausing to search once more for even the slightest signs of life in Hoole and Zak.

Tash took a few frightened steps backward. The ghost had almost reached her——the hands were almost around her neck. Above them, where a face should have been, Tash saw a rolling blob of energy. A face seemed to be pushing its way out of the gray matter.

Sheer terror drove her backward. She couldn't wait for Deevee any longer, and turned back up the corridor. The ghost pursued, but at a slower pace. It seemed calm and certain that it would catch her.

In the light of her glow rod Tash saw that she had reached the false wall that hid the tunnel. Frantically, she searched for a control mechanism so she could shut the door and seal the ghost in. When she glanced down the hallway, the ghost still followed her. In the darkness of the hall it gave off an eerie glow.

"Come on, come on. There!" she muttered, finding a switch on the wall. She touched it, and the door slid back into place.

Tash backed farther up the tunnel, hoping she had sealed the nightmare away. But a moment later the secret door shimmered, and the ghost melted through it.

Tash ... Arranda.

The voice assaulted her from all sides.

"No! Stay away!" She turned and ran again.

In a flash she burst out of the tunnel. She found the stairs leading to the upper level and scrambled up to the solarium. She ran down the corridor until she reached the docking bay, then she hurried to the *Shroud* and raced onboard. She did not stop until her own door was sealed shut behind her.

She gasped for breath. Fear, sorrow, and anger welled up inside her. She was ashamed that she had abandoned Deevee and Zak, but the sight of the ghostly image had terrified her.

Tash had no idea how long she lay there. She kept hoping she would wake up and find that she was not on Nespis 8 and that Hoole and Zak were safe.

But she was already awake, and the only thing that came to her was an ominous sound.

Clunk. Clunk. Clunk.

Footsteps approached the *Shroud.*

"No," Tash whispered out loud.

Hrrrmmmm. The hatch opened. Footsteps started down the main corridor. They were headed for her cabin. Did the ghost walk?

Tash could only stare wide-eyed as someone pressed a button and the door slid open.

Then she found herself staring into a pair of twinkling blue eyes.

"ForceFlow!" Relief flooded through her. "How did you get in here?"

"I gave him entry," Deevee said, stepping into the door frame.

The dark-haired man smiled softly. "I found Deevee near the library. He said you had run away in a panic. We looked everywhere, then figured you'd come here."

"Where have you been?" Tash nearly sobbed. "Do you know what's happened?"

"I do," ForceFlow said, grimly. "It's tragic."

"It's the curse," she said. "But it's not the library, it's the books themselves. When Zak opened one, there was a flash of light, and the next thing we knew..." She couldn't finish her sentence.

ForceFlow sat down on the edge of her bed. "I'm beginning to think you're right, Tash. That old legend about the curse may be true. But that doesn't mean *no one* should enter the library."

She wiped a tear from her eye. "What do you mean?"

In response, ForceFlow looked at Deevee. "What does the legend say exactly?"

Deevee replied, "That no one but a Jedi could enter the library unharmed. "

"So what?" Tash said. "We don't have a Jedi."

ForceFlow smiled. "We have you."

"Not funny," she sniffed. "I know I'm not a Jedi. I've never done anything but fail when I try to use the Force."

"I'm very serious." ForceFlow stood up. "Tash, I've been researching the Jedi for years. I've made it my life's work. If there's one thing I'm sure of, it's that the Force is with you."

She shook her head. "No way. There's something in the library. Something real. It grabbed me. It almost killed me!" The news seemed to shock ForceFlow. "Why would I want to go back there anyway?"

"Because the ancient Jedi knew many things," ForceFlow said carefully. "They may even have known... how to bring back the dead."

Tash paused. "I've never heard of anything like that. I always thought the Jedi were one with the Force. They knew when it was their time to die. They wouldn't want to bring back the dead."

ForceFlow shrugged. "Perhaps, perhaps not. Great secrets lie in wait down there. But we'll never know them unless you go down and break the spell."

Tash heaved a great sigh. The thought of those cold fingers around her neck still frightened her. But what did she have to lose? She had lost her parents months ago. She had lost her uncle. Now she had lost her brother, her only friend in the world. She had nothing left but desperate hope.

"Tash," ForceFlow said, "Zak was a good boy. But he didn't survive because he wasn't aware of the Force. You are. Don't you feel it?"

Tash didn't know what to say. Until recently, she had felt something. But now... "I don't know. There aren't any Jedi left to teach me. How do I know if I can use the Force?"

"Break the curse and open the books!" ForceFlow urged. "All the answers are there!"

A few moments later Tash was walking down the corridor to the library. She had taken this way several times, but each time she had not wanted to go. This time, she forced herself forward. She was going into the library to face the curse of the dark side.

Her knees trembled.

Some Jedi, she thought.

The sound of Deevee's footsteps sounded reassuringly behind her. "I still don't understand why ForceFlow did not come with us," the droid said. "There is safety in numbers."

Tash whispered, "Because he's not a Jedi. It wouldn't be safe for him."

"It is not safe for *you*," the droid replied. "I should not permit this."

Tash half wished that Deevee *would* stop her from going. But without Hoole's commands, Deevee had only his own programming to go by, and he could find no alternative.

By the time she reached the entrance to the library, Tash was numb with sorrow and fear. But she was still aware enough to be stunned when she saw that the room was empty.

Deevee spoke the question she was asking herself. "Where have the bodies gone?" Zak and Hoole had disappeared, just like the treasure hunters. Their bodies had been whisked away to... where?

An image popped into Tash's mind. "The morgue," Tash breathed.

"Pardon?" the droid asked.

"Zak and I found a room filled with bodies. They were being preserved in freezing chambers. Maybe Zak and Uncle Hoole's bodies have been taken there."

Quickly, Tash described the entrance she and Zak had found: the ladder in the ventilation shaft, the sloping corridor, and the secret door. "That room has something to do with what's happening," she said. "Deevee, you have to go find them."

"I cannot leave you, Tash," the droid insisted.

Tash tried to sound braver than she felt. "Deevee, if anything's going to happen, you won't be able to stop it. Go find Uncle Hoole and Zak."

The droid hesitated. His computer brain, which could calculate a thousand probabilities in a nanosecond, could not

solve this single dilemma. To stay with Tash although he would be of no use, or to find Zak and his master?

His brain reached a conclusion. Deevee turned and hurried away from the library.

Now Tash was alone. Truly alone. She had been dropped as far down into a black hole as anyone could ever be. She was either going to be lost forever, or some miracle would pull her back into the light again.

She stepped into the library.

For the first time, she truly studied her surroundings. There must have been ten thousand books lining the high shelves, all of them ancient, and covered in layers of dust. She walked up to one shelf and began to read the words printed on the spines. Some were in alien languages, but most were in Basic, the common language of the galaxy. Some books were about science, others were about medicine, others about philosophy.

Tash stopped at one title that read *The History of the Jedi Knights.*

It seemed as good a place as any to start. Tash took the book down from the shelf without opening it. She took a deep breath. Amazed, she felt her fear melt away. She felt at peace. Tash didn't know what came after death, but she knew if there was anything, Zak would be waiting there for her. And her parents.

Tash started to open the book.

She never finished.

A powerful blow slapped the book from her hand and sent it spinning against a wall. Surprised, Tash looked up to see what had struck her.

She found herself looking into the eyes of the ghost.

Chapter Sixteen

Tash's knees were trembling so hard she almost fell to the ground. The ghost was no longer shapeless. It was still transparent and pale as death, but it stood before her in the form of a human man. Its cheeks were sunken. The tatters of its robe hung about it, faintly glowing, and there were gaping wounds in its body. If the ghost had been alive, Tash would have thought the wounds were marks left by a light saber.

"Tash Arranda."

The ghost spoke, not in her head this time, but directly to her in a voice so full of sadness Tash thought her heart would break if it did not stop from sheer fright.

"Wh-Who..." she tried to say.

"I have been trying to speak with you for some time," the ghost said in a low, moaning voice.

She backed toward the door. "Please... don't hurt me!"

The ghost drifted closer. "I am not here to hurt you, Tash. I'm trying to save you."

"Save me?" she asked. "But... you're the voice that kept threatening me. And you tried to choke me to death!"

The ghost spread its transparent arms in a helpless gesture. "I was trying to scare you out of the library, yes. But only because

the library is dangerous. In the morgue, I managed to gather enough energy to push you toward the secret exit."

"Why didn't you just talk to me, the way you are now?" she said.

The ghost's face grew sadder. "I did not wish to hurt you, but I had to do something to save your life. When you were down in the morgue, you were in great danger, but you could not hear my voice. I had to do something to get you out of there." The ghost floated closer. "In all the years I have been here, no one has been able even to sense my presence. You were the first, but even you could barely see or hear me. I kept sending you warnings, but all you could do was *feel* them."

Tash's jaw dropped. "I kept feeling fear all around me."

"Those were my messages. You could not hear the words, but you sensed the danger. I have been with you since the moment you arrived on Nespis 8."

"Who are you?" she asked. "Are you... are you really dead?"

The ghost bowed its head in shame. "I was once a Jedi Knight. My name was Aidan Bok. I was in charge of guarding the old Jedi library, but I failed in my task. Years ago, Darth Vader came here to destroy the library. I tried to stop him, but he killed me and vaporized the library. Thousands of years of Jedi wisdom were destroyed, all because of my failure."

Tash said, "I thought that Jedi Knights passed on and became part of the Force when they died."

"I could not," the ghost said. "I was ashamed of my failure. I linger here, where I failed in my duty. This is my punishment, to remain here in this forgotten station." The ghost gestured to the terrible wounds in its body: "My body is gone, and I still bear the wounds Vader gave me. I don't deserve to return to rest in the Force."

She didn't know what to do or say. All she could think of was something her mother had always told her. "I'm... I'm sure you did your best. That's all anyone could ask."

The ghost suddenly lifted its head. Its eyes stared into the wall as if seeing something Tash could not. "You must go. There is great danger here."

Tash looked around. "Then this place really is cursed?"

"No. The dark-side curse is only a myth. Even the story that only a Jedi can enter is only a myth. This is not even the original library. That was destroyed long ago. Years later, an evil scientist came to Nespis 8 and built a new library. Then he started a rumor that the library contained powerful Jedi wisdom and he claimed that only those who understood the Force could safely enter."

"Why?" Tash asked.

"That lie was spread so people who think they have the Force would come to Nespis 8. This library is only a trap built by that scientist. I think he wants to capture the essence of a Jedi Knight. The devices in this library steal the life energy from anyone who opens a book here."

Tash thought her head would split from all the confusing information she was getting. "This doesn't make sense. Why would anyone go to all this trouble? There's no reason to fool people with fake books."

"Perhaps not normal people," the ghost replied in its hollow voice. "But someone sensitive to the Force might guess something was wrong and resist the life-stealer. The scientist needed to disguise his machinery. And it worked!" The ghost sighed. "For years I have watched victims come here looking for the old library, hoping to learn to become Jedi themselves. Instead, they have were captured by this trap. And I was helpless to save them."

"Why couldn't you warn them?" Tash asked.

The empty eyes stared at her. "Because I can only appear to someone else who has the Force."

Tash's mouth went dry. "But——But that means that I"

"Yes, Tash Arranda," said the ghost. "The Force is with you."

Tash had longed to hear those words since the day she heard of the Jedi. Now they rushed into her body like a bolt of energy. All her doubts were swept aside. She knew it. She had always known it. Sometimes, she realized, she just needed someone else to say it. She felt a warm electric tingle spread through her. It was familiar, and Tash recalled the other time she had experienced it. She had felt that same electricity on that day on D'vouran when she had met Luke Skywalker. Instinctively, she knew it was an awareness of the Force. The feeling took her breath away, and for a moment she could not speak.

It didn't matter. She had no chance to speak, because in the next moment ForceFlow stormed into the library with an angry and impatient look on his face. He did not seem to notice Aidan.

"Tash!" ForceFlow demanded. "Why haven't you opened a book yet?"

Tash didn't know where to start. Excited words poured out of her. "ForceFlow! You won't believe it... I just learned that I'm... I mean, this library! We can't stay here! We've got to get out of here now. We're in danger. I just learned this from a ghost!"

ForceFlow growled, "What are you babbling about, girl?"

Tash tried to calm herself. "This room is a trap. That's why people have been disappearing. I know it sounds strange, but I just learned this from a Jedi ghost. I can see him. He's right here in the room. I can communicate with him because I have the Force!"

ForceFlow began to tremble with rage. His face twisted into a snarl.

"The Force! The Force!" he suddenly shouted angrily. "Blast the Force down the darkest black hole in the galaxy!"

And with that, ForceFlow began to shiver. The skin crawled across his bones. Before Tash's eyes, ForceFlow changed shape. His handsome face melted and morphed into the tall and terrible figure of Borborygmus Gog.

Chapter Seventeen

Tash was stunned. The electric tingle, her awareness of the Force, vanished. "Not you. It can't be you!"

Gog loomed over her. Like Hoole, he was a Shi'ido and could change into any shape he chose. He had fooled her into thinking he was ForceFlow. "Oh, but it is. This time, I will personally make sure that you never foil my plans again."

She took a step back. "Wh-What have you done with ForceFlow?"

Gog threw his head back and howled with laughter. Still chuckling, he turned his evil glare on Tash. "Stupid child. I *am* ForceFlow. I have *always* been ForceFlow!"

Tash was stunned. It was impossible. "That's not true!" she replied. "ForceFlow works against the Empire. He keeps the legends of the Jedi Knights alive. He's a hero!"

"Yes. And he also exists only in your head." Gog laughed evilly. "ForceFlow is a trap, just like this place. I wanted to capture people with the Force. I knew the Emperor had killed all the Jedi. I had to find someone who did not know the Force was with them. So I created ForceFlow to attract people interested in the Jedi Knights. Just like you."

Tash felt like her heart had suddenly frozen. "You made me think ForceFlow was a hero. You made me befriend... *you*."

Gog chuckled. "Yes, I did."

Tash felt her frozen heart break into pieces.

Gog laughed. "Don't feel bad. You weren't the only one. I did the same to dozens of people. Once I made contact with them through the HoloNet, I lured them to Nespis 8 where I could trap them with this library.'"

"Why?" Tash could not help but ask.

Gog grinned. "Because I knew that sooner or later, I'd find a victim sensitive to the Force." Gog nearly spat when he said the words *the Force.* "The Force is the final segment of my project."

He held out his grasping fingers as if to grab Tash. "I have waited. *Patiently.* For years! My library has trapped the life energy of hundreds of people, but not a single one of them was useful."

Tash's mind reeled. "You've been killing innocent people."

"Stupid, stupid human," Gog spat. "I wouldn't go to so much trouble just to kill them. They're in stasis. I can use them even if they don't have the Force. I've been studying their life essence, trying to understand what makes things *live.*"

"You captured their life essence?" she asked. "You mean, those bodies are still alive?"

"In a manner of speaking. But I have no intention of returning their essence to their bodies. Certainly not that meddling Hoole. I'll enjoy knowing that Hoole's very essence is trapped within my machinery." Gog's eyes gleamed coldly. "I've wanted to get revenge on Hoole for twenty years."

Twenty years? Tash and Zak had been with Hoole when he discovered Gog's first experiment, the living planet. But that had only been a few months ago.

Tash recalled Hoole's mysterious past. Obviously, Gog and Hoole went back much farther than Project Starscream.

Gog saw the confused look on her face and grinned. "Oh, yes, you were right about one thing, Tash. Your uncle Hoole has a dark past. A *very* dark past."

"I don't understand——" she started to say.

"You don't need to," Gog interrupted. "I have waited long enough to find a Force user. Now I have one."

Gog suddenly raised a blaster. He pointed it at Tash. "Now, Tash. Open the book."

Chapter Eighteen

Tash held the book in her trembling hands. It looked innocent enough——an old volume with a leather cover. Gold letters were stamped across the front.

But it was a trap. The minute she opened it, Gog's machines would suck the life force from her body, trapping it forever. She was too frightened to move.

"Tash."

The voice of Aidan snapped her from her trance. She had been so overwhelmed by the appearance of Gog that she had forgotten the Jedi ghost.

She looked for him now. The gray figure was still hovering next to her, gazing at her with his empty eyes. "Aidan, help me," she pleaded.

"Stop mumbling and open the book!" Gog pointed his blaster at her head. He obviously could not see or hear Aidan.

"I cannot help you," Aidan sighed. "I lost my power long ago, when I failed to defeat Vader. I am no longer a Jedi."

"But you were able to touch me. You shoved me through a doorway!" Tash cried.

Gog raised an eyebrow. He followed Tash's gaze, but all he saw was empty air. "I will give you to the count of three," the evil

Shi'ido threatened. "If you do not open the book, I'll blast you to atoms. I promise you, the Essence Stealer is far less painful."

Aidan frowned at Tash. "I was able to touch you because we are connected by the Force. I drew on your link with the Force to become more solid, just as I draw on it now to become visible to you. But that's all I can do. I tried to be a hero once, Tash, and I failed."

Tash realized that Aidan sounded just like her. She had thought one failure meant the end of all her hopes. She had sulked. She had given up her dreams of becoming a Jedi until Aidan told her that she had the Force. She had just needed someone to tell her what she already knew in her heart.

Maybe that's what Aidan needed too.

Gog heard none of this. He began to count. "One."

"Aidan!" she begged. "You're only a failure if you think you are."

The ghost whispered, "I wish I could believe that, Tash. But the Force is no longer with me."

"But you said we were connected by the Force! That means we both have to have it! Please!"

"Pretending to be' insane won't help you," Gog said. "Open the book. Two! " His finger tightened on the trigger.

"But I'm too weak," the ghost said.

"Try!" she begged. "If we're connected, maybe we can do it together."

There was flicker of light in the ghost's eyes. "I'll try. Tash, focus on the blaster. Use the Force to pull it from his hand."

Tash turned to Gog. As she did, time seemed to slow down. She saw the black weapon gleam in Gog's hand. She felt her connection to the Force. Focusing all her willpower, she imagined the Force reaching out. Beside her, she knew that Aidan was doing the same.

For a second, just a brief instant in time, she felt something surge out of her.

"Three," Gog said. He fired.

Tash's Force-power was too weak to pull the blaster from Gog's grip. But something made his hand jerk downward and his shot went awry. The blaster bolt shattered the floor at his feet and sent up a shower of sparks. For a moment, the Shi'ido was lost in a cloud of smoke.

"Run!" Aidan urged.

Dropping the book, Tash slipped past Gog and raced up the hallway. The Jedi ghost was right beside her, gliding smoothly along the floor.

"He is coming," Aidan warned.

Tash could already hear Gog's footsteps pounding after her.

"I've got to get to the morgue," she said. "Zak and Uncle Hoole are still alive!"

Aidan tried to help. "The fastest way is to go down the ventilation shaft and——"

"I'm not going to go that way," Tash interrupted. Maybe it was the Force, or maybe it was just hope, but a clear plan suddenly formed in her mind. "I've got a better idea."

Reaching the end of the hallway, Tash found herself in the gallery where they had discovered Mangol's body. She turned around to face the six maintenance tunnels. She'd just come out of the fifth one. Now she plunged into the first.

"Running is useless!" Gog roared behind her. "There is no place to hide from me!"

It was a long way to the end of the tunnel, but Tash refused to slow down. She would not give up. She reached the end of the corridor and found the garbage chute she and Zak had used before. She dove in.

The ride was as slick and smooth as before, and she smelled the stench of garbage before she flew out into the pit and dropped into the slimy pool. The loud splash she made caught the attention of the room's occupant.

Uuuhhhhhrrrrrr.

Aidan melted through the walls. "Tash, have you forgotten? The dianoga is here!"

"I know," she replied, wading toward the exit door. She heard Gog's voice echo down the garbage chute, and she knew that he was following her down.

Tash forced herself to slow down, taking small steps, making as little splash as possible. She knew the dianoga could not see well. It would have to rely on splashes in the water.

But I'm not going to make any, she thought.

Gog could not say the same. The Shi'ido plunged feet first into the cesspool, landing ten meters away with a loud splash. He held up a glow rod, and Tash saw his angry face. "I told you, you could not hide from me!" he growled.

"You haven't caught me yet," she retorted.

Roaring, Gog charged forward, splashing his way toward her. But before he'd covered half the distance, the Shi'ido stumbled and gasped.

A thick tentacle had wrapped itself around his waist. "No!" Gog yelled. Then he was pulled under the surface of the slimy pool.

Tash didn't wait to celebrate her victory. She hurried to the exit hatch and dragged her sopping body out of the garbage pit.

Following the cold air, Tash found herself once more in the morgue. She shivered——and not just from the cold. She knew that the bodies in the containers were still alive, their life force trapped in Gog's machinery. Tash saw that there were two new containers in the room. She rubbed frost away from the transparent covering... and saw her brother's face. In the next container lay Uncle Hoole.

"Tash!" a familiar voice called. Deevee stepped from behind one of the two containers.

Tash was delighted. She had almost forgotten that she'd sent Deevee down to the morgue. The droid pointed to the two containers. "I have spent several minutes examining this equipment. If I'm not mistaken, there is some possibility that these victims are still alive——"

"They are!" Tash said. "Their life essences are trapped in that crystal globe. We have to reverse the process."

Deevee's mechanical shoulders slumped. "As you know, my computer brain is quite powerful, but I'm afraid this technology is too complex, and that knowledge is beyond me. I don't know how."

"I do."

Tash looked at Aidan. The flicker she had seen in the ghost's eyes had grown to a steady light. "You do?" she asked.

"I've spent years watching Gog set up his experiments here and trap people. I was helpless to stop him, but I know how his equipment works."

"Lead the way," she replied.

"Tash, to whom are you speaking?" Deevee asked.

Tash smiled. "I'll tell you later."

Aidan guided them to the computer panels beneath the crystal globe. Tash watched the glowing, swirling mass inside. Somewhere, trapped in that globe, were Zak and Uncle Hoole.

Aidan quickly guided Tash through a series of controls. When she was done, he pointed to a large red lever. "There. Just activate this energy transformer. It should cause feedback through the life-stealing device and reverse the process. The life forces within the crystal should return to the proper bodies in the containers."

As Tash reached for the lever, a blaster bolt struck the ground beside her. She jumped back, startled.

"Get away from the lever!" said a commanding voice. Tash and Deevee spun around.

There stood Gog. His clothes were half torn, and a terrible scar ran down the side of his face. But he was still holding the blaster in his hand.

Chapter Nineteen

Gog's body trembled with anger. He looked exhausted from his fight with the dianoga, and he leaned against one of the tanks for support. But the blaster was steady in his hand. "The Essence Stealer would have been unpleasant, but not too painful," he said in a voice as sharp as a vibroblade. "But a blaster set on heavy stun will leave you sick for days. Of course, by the time you come around, I'll have picked your Force-sensitive brain clean."

Gog fired his blaster.

Tash winced, but the bolt never struck her. It was intercepted in mid-flight by Deevee. The energy bolt shattered his chest plate and sent him clattering to the floor in a shower of wires and sparks. For a moment, both Tash and Gog stared down in surprise at the heroic droid.

Then Tash dove for the lever.

She pulled it before Gog could fire again.

The results were immediate. Energy seemed to stream from the crystal globe, crackling and sparking along the pipes, flashing toward the containers. Circuits began to pop, and smoke began to rise from every container touched by the energy surge. In seconds, all of them were aglow.

"No!" Gog shouted.

He raised his blaster to fire again just as the power surge reached the container where he stood. A fountain of sparks burst from the container's circuits, bathing Gog in a shower of electricity. The force of the small explosion hurled the Shi'ido backward, his clothes smoldering. The blaster flew from his hand and clattered to the ground a few meters away. It had melted into a lump of metal.

Gog struggled to his knees. The hand that had held the blaster was blackened from the explosion, and other burns streaked his face and body. The evil Shi'ido swore a curse in a language Tash didn't know, and he ran.

"We can't let him get away!" Tash said.

"He's heading for the secret passage," Aidan replied.

Tash looked around. There was no one to help her. Zak and Hoole were stirring, but in no condition to walk, much less run after Gog. Deevee looked terribly damaged. She saw a glow rod lying near one of the freezing chambers and snatched it up.

"Come on," she said.

She started after Gog, with the Jedi ghost drifting beside her.

Hurrying up the secret passageway, Tash heard the clanging echo of her boots on the metal flooring. But even louder than her own movements, she heard the struggling gasps and wheezes of Gog as he tried to escape. She could tell he was badly wounded, and every step caused him pain.

She gained steadily, and soon she could see him laboring at the edge of her light. He was a crazy sight. Every five or ten steps, the Shi'ido tried to change shape. One moment she was chasing after a lizard-like tauntaun, the next she was after a scrambling runyip, and the next she was chasing a shambling nerf. But each shape-change seemed to cause the wounded scientist terrible agony, and finally with a cry he shifted back into his own form.

She reached the end of the passage and the huge ventilation shaft. The light from her glow rod revealed the scientist's twisted face. Beyond him hung the open air and darkness of the wide pit.

At the edge of the pit was the ladder Zak and Tash had climbed earlier.

"Gog!" she yelled.

The Shi'ido turned. "Vader was right. I should have killed you when I had the chance. But that time will come, I swear it!"

Gog turned to grab the ladder.

"Don't!" Tash called. "You're too badly hurt. You'll never make it!"

Gog ignored her. His blackened hands clutched the rails, and for a moment, Tash thought he would get away. But as he started to climb, his wounded hands failed him. He started to slip. Tash lunged forward, but she was too late.

Gog flashed past her as he fell. In a desperate attempt to save himself, the Shi'ido was shapeshifting into every form he could think of. But nothing could save him. With a wordless cry, Gog fell away from the ladder and Tash watched his gray form shrink into the void.

"No one's ever found the bottom," she said, remembering the words of the man she thought was ForceFlow.

Aidan peered down the great shaft. "There is a bottom," he said, "but it's a long, long way down."

Tash and Aidan hurried back to the morgue. As they arrived, the occupants of the freezing chambers had begun to stir. Those who had been trapped the shortest time——the treasure hunters, Zak, and Uncle Hoole——rose first, staggering out of their containers and looking around in amazement.

Tash dropped the blaster and ran to her brother, who was running his hands through his tousled hair like someone who had awakened with a headache.

"Zak, you're alive!" Tash yelled.

"Are you sure?" he groaned. "I don't feel like it."

Hoole looked around, taking in the machinery, the crystal globe, and Tash all at once. "You must tell us what happened, Tash," Hoole said, "but please begin by explaining what has happened to my droid."

"Deevee! He saved my life," Tash started. She ran and knelt at his side. "Deevee, are you all right? Can you function?"

Live wires still sparked and burned around Deevees' chest plate. He looked heavily damaged. "I will need replacement parts," he said. He stared sadly at the hole in his chest plate and heaved an electronic sigh. "One would think that, with a brain as powerful as mine, I would have come up with a better plan."

"You saved my life, Deevee," Tash said, wrapping her arms around the metallic hero's shoulders. "Thanks."

As quickly and clearly as she could, Tash told them what had happened.

Hoole listened intently. "Are you sure Gog is gone?"

"I saw him fall. No one could have survived that."

Hoole nodded, then pointed to the many people struggling to crawl out of their freezing chambers. They looked dazed and confused. "Zak, Tash, help free these people. I need to examine this equipment." Without waiting for their answer, Hoole turned and began to study the equipment Gog had left behind. A look of deep concern settled over his face.

Zak and Tash did as they were told, quickly pulling Gog's victims from their small prisons and assuring them they were all right now. Tash helped Mangol crawl from his chamber and plop down on the floor, rubbing his temples.

"You're all right," she assured him. "Everything's going to be okay."

The fortune-seeker barely heard her. He was delirious, and kept mumbling, "I found it though. The library. I found it, it's all mine. Heh, heh. All mine."

Tash shook her head and muttered to herself, "You're welcome to it," before moving on to help someone else.

Tash and Zak had just gathered the prisoners together, and done their best to explain what had happened, when Hoole turned away from the Essence Stealer. "This equipment is very technical. I'm not sure I understand all of it. But if I'm right, Gog was trying to manipulate the Force."

Tash looked at Aidan, who nodded. "That's right," she said.

Hoole shook his head, and Tash heard him mutter, "He has been tampering with power that could destroy the galaxy itself. This time he has gone too far."

"Well, at least he's been stopped, once and for all," she said.

Hoole raised an eyebrow. He seemed surprised that she'd heard him. "Perhaps," he said. "Perhaps."

Epilogue

Tash, Zak, and Hoole helped Gog's prisoners back to the docking bay. There were several ships left on Nespis 8. At least one of them, they guessed, had belonged to Domisari. Another belonged to Mangol. As soon as Hoole was sure that the ships and the rescued prisoners were fit to fly, he turned his attention away from them and back to his own ship.

"They can all get off Nespis 8. Now it's time we did. And fast."

Hoole and Zak carried Deevee onboard the *Shroud*. Tash stayed behind a moment longer.

She hadn't told anyone about Aidan. There hadn't been time. And, she thought, it might be too difficult to explain.

The ghost seemed to read her mind. "It will always be difficult, Tash. There will always be those who do not *want* to understand the Force. But you'll be fine." He smiled.

Now that Tash had a chance to catch her breath, she noticed that the Jedi ghost had changed. His face no longer looked haunted, and his cheeks had fleshed out. He now looked completely distinct——hardly like a ghost at all, except that a faint glowing light surrounded his body.

"Your wounds are gone," Tash noticed.

The ghost nodded. "Thanks to you. Soon I'll leave this place, to join with those Jedi who have passed into the Force. You helped me remember that the Force is always with me. Wounds——all wounds——eventually heal. Only the Force lasts forever."

"The Force," she whispered. "I can't believe it's real. I mean, I can't believe it's with me. What do I do?"

"Follow your heart. Seek help from those around you," Aidan replied. In the dim light of the docking bay, he seemed to fade.

"Like who?" Tash asked. "My brother? He's only just now starting to think the Force is real."

Aidan smiled again. "He may surprise you. Goodbye, Tash."

"Wait!" she called out. "I have a million questions. What do you mean about Zak?"

But the ghost of the Jedi was gone.

Tash lingered inside Nespis 8 a moment longer. She would never forget that in those dark, haunted hallways, she had finally touched the Force. She turned and hurried into the ship.

***

Long after the echoes of the *Shroud*'s engines had faded from Nespis 8, the scream of Imperial TIE fighters made its walls shiver. The rumble of Star Destroyers nearly shook its foundations to shards. A battalion of stormtroopers swarmed over the abandoned space station. Once it was secure, a single shuttle cruised ominously on board, and a black-armored figure stepped out.

Darth Vader stopped. He reached out with the dark side of the Force, scanning the station. In an instant, he knew they had come too late. His assassin, Domisari, was dead.

Hoole and his companions were no longer there. Gog was nowhere to be found——Vader was sure he was dead. His dark mind swept over the morgue, where Gog's machinery still

smoldered. Instantly, the Dark Lord knew what Gog had been trying to do.

"Fool," the man in the mask told himself. "There is only one way to master the Force, and that is through the dark side."

Vader was about to turn back into the ship when he paused. He felt something... a disturbance in the Force. It was tiny, almost insignificant. But it was there, like a footprint left in the sand.

Another Jedi?

No, Vader told himself. He had destroyed all the Jedi. He had even killed one here, on Nespis 8, years ago. That's what he must have felt. The echoes of that long-ago battle.

He turned to a waiting stormtrooper. "Recall your men, commander. Nespis 8 is dead."

With a swirl of his cape, the Dark Lord returned to his ship and departed.

Had he lingered a moment longer, Vader might have detected something deep in the bowels of the space station. At the bottom of a deep ventilation shaft, in darkness as profound as a black hole, a figure stirred. The fingers of a burned and blackened hand twitched, and a dark eye opened...

Book Six
Army of Terror

Prologue

The small shuttle craft glided through space toward an enormous Star Destroyer. The shuttle was tiny compared to the large battleship. It looked like a speck of dust floating through the void.

But thousands of soldiers on board the powerful Star Destroyer trembled in fear when they heard the name of the shuttle's single passenger.

Darth Vader.

Vader did not watch as his shuttle landed in the Destroyer's docking bay. He was deep in his own dark thoughts. One phrase worked its way into his mind.

Project Starscream.

Months ago, Starscream had been a promising experiment run by the Imperial scientist Borborygmus Gog. Now it was all but ruined, thanks to the interference of a scientist named Hoole and two meddling children. They had successfully wrecked the first five phases of Starscream. They had tampered with D'vouran, the living planet. They had destroyed the undead research on Necropolis. They had neutralized the plague virus on Gobindi, and then demolished the promising Nightmare Machine. Finally, they had shattered Gog's plans to manipulate the power of the Force.

Vader clenched a gloved fist. Gog had hidden this last plan from the Dark Lord. Vader knew the scientist feared him and had searched for a way to cancel out Vader's dark side powers. *Fortunately for Gog*, Vader thought, *he died before I discovered his plan. I would have made him beg for death.*

Hoole and his young companions had escaped from Nespis 8 just before Vader arrived. Even now, Vader's ships were combing the nearby star systems in search of the escapees.

Leaving the shuttle, Vader barely acknowledged the presence of the stormtrooper squadron that saluted him as he strode from his shuttle, his dark cape swirling behind him. He did not pause until he reached the captain of the Star Destroyer, who bowed nervously.

"Lord Vader," the captain said. "Welcome aboard. The ship is yours to command."

"Excellent, Captain," Vader hissed through his black, skull-like mask.

Vader continued walking. The captain struggled to keep up with the Dark Lord's powerful stride. "I-I trust your mission to Nespis 8 went well?"

"It is not yet complete," Vader replied. "I have one thing more to do before Project Starscream is completely under my control."

Vader knew the scout ships would not find Hoole and his companions. But he did know where Hoole would go next. He felt the dark side of the Force flow through him. He knew many things. He could not see the future clearly, but he sensed that it would end in bloodshed. He relished the thought.

"My lord," the captain asked. "What are your orders?"

"Tell the scout ships to continue their search," Vader commanded. "Meanwhile, set your course for the headquarters of Project Starscream."

Vader flexed the fingers of his right hand. Yes, blood would be shed. He was sure of it.

And he would be the one to shed it.

Chapter One

"There's another one," Tash Arranda said with a tremor in her voice.

She pointed at a control panel in the cockpit of the *Shroud*. The scanner registered a tiny blip hovering just at the edge of their sensor range.

On her left, her brother Zak held his breath. On her right, her uncle Hoole sat as still as stone. Only his tight grip on the *Shroud*'s guidance control stick revealed his tension.

All three of them knew what that blip represented——an Imperial Star Destroyer, bristling with weapons. It was like an enormous shark, hunting through the vast ocean of space.

It was hunting for them.

Tash let her breath out slowly. Only the *Shroud*'s emergency lights were running, but even in their dim glow she could see her breath in the cold air of the *Shroud*'s cockpit. Twenty minutes before, Hoole had deactivated almost all of the ship's power systems, and he had turned the life support down to a bare minimum.

"I'm freezing," Tash muttered. "Can't we turn the heat up a little?"

"Well, it's warmer in an Imperial detention center," Zak replied. "Which is where we'll find ourselves if we power up the systems and they detect us."

"Here it comes," Hoole said flatly.

They watched as the blip changed course, growing larger as it headed straight for them.

"Do they see us?" Zak asked in a sharp whisper.

"I don't know," Hoole replied.

"Maybe we should make a break for it."

"No, it's too late," Hoole said. "We are under their guns. We will just have to wait it out."

Tash looked at her uncle. He stared stonily at the ship's instruments. For once, she admired his inhuman ability to stay levelheaded. Hoole was a Shi'ido and, unlike his human niece and nephew, he seemed able to disconnect his emotions from his surroundings. His face rarely changed expression.

The blip grew so large that it seemed to blot out the scanning screen. Tash and Zak felt the *Shroud* begin to shake around them.

Zak, Tash, their uncle Hoole, and his droid, D-V9, had been on the run from Imperial forces for two days, ever since they had fled from the space station Nespis 8 and Borborygmus Gog.

Tash shivered when she remembered Nespis 8 and Gog. Gog was a Shi'ido, like Uncle Hoole, and could change his form at will. He was also an Imperial scientist. By shapeshifting into disguise, Gog had been able to lure Tash, Zak, and Hoole to Nespis 8. And when the evil scientist realized he could not use Tash's sensitivity to the Force in his experiments, he had almost killed her. But Gog, who had come so close to destroying them all, had fallen to his own death down a deep shaft in the space station.

Unfortunately, their troubles had not ended with Gog's death. The scientist had created Project Starscream for the Empire, and the Emperor's most powerful servant had come to Nespis 8 to investigate. Tash, Zak, Hoole, and Deevee had escaped Nespis 8 just before the arrival of Darth Vader.

Vader. The thought of him made Tash's skin crawl. He was the Dark Lord of the Sith, a master of the dark side of the Force and, next to the Emperor, the most powerful man in the galaxy. He was far more terrifying than Gog. They said Vader could kill people with a single thought. They also said that, rather than kill, the Dark Lord preferred to rule through two devices: torture and terror. None of them wanted to imagine what horrors would await them in one of Vader's prison cells.

In the viewport, the two Arrandas saw space rocks of various sizes zip by. Hoole had attempted to hide their ship from the Imperials by flying through a small asteroid belt and landing the *Shroud* on an asteroid twice its size.

Suddenly, Zak cried out. "It's going to pass right over!"

A giant field of white had settled over their ship, blotting out the stars. They were looking at the underbelly of an Imperial Star Destroyer. The floating fortress was gigantic. Tash saw a squad of Imperial TIE fighters buzz like angry flies around the massive cruiser's docking port. Tash and Zak knew that sensor beams were shooting from the Star Destroyer, searching for any sign of them. But because Hoole had cut off all the *Shroud*'s power, their ship was as dead as the asteroid on which it floated. The Imperial sensor beams passed over it without stopping.

The energy put out by the Star Destroyer's enormous engines shook the entire asteroid upon which they sat. The *Shroud* trembled like a leaf on a tree. For a moment Zak thought the energy waves would tear the ship apart. But a moment later, the giant battleship had passed on. Zak and Tash sighed and looked at each other. They were safe.

"I am going to power up the systems so that we can depart," Uncle Hoole said. "Please see how Deevee's repairs are coming along."

"Power up?" Zak asked. "Where are we going?" Hoole paused. A frown pulled at the edge of his mouth. Hoole rarely explained to Tash and Zak what he was planning and where they

were going. But this time, his expression seemed to suggest that Zak and Tash had a right to know.

"We are going to end this mystery once and for all," the Shi'ido declared. "I know where Project Starscream is located."

Chapter Two

"What!" Zak shouted in surprise

"H-How?" Tash stammered. "Where?"

Hoole looked at them closely before speaking. "I found some data stored in the computers on Nespis 8. It suggested that the main headquarters for Gog's experiment are on the planet Kiva. It's only a short hyperspace jump from here, and I want to go there and make sure everything Gog was doing is destroyed."

"But-But what if we run into other Imperial scientists there?" Zak stammered.

"We won't," Hoole promised. "Trust me."

Stunned, Zak and Tash could only stare as Hoole added, "Now please make sure that Deevee is fully operational."

Before Zak and Tash could ask any more questions, their uncle had already glided past them.

Zak and Tash were still shaking their heads as they reached the small maintenance room at the center of their starship. The door to the room slid back, revealing a tall, humanlike droid. DV-9's once-silver body was covered with scratches and soot, and several dents pockmarked his metallic shell. A long, black streak ran across his chestplate. The droid had obviously tried to polish it away, but the scar could still be seen in the cabin lights.

"How are the repairs going, Deevee?" Zak asked.

The droid sighed heavily. "Well enough, I suppose. I've corrected all the internal damage that blaster bolt caused, but I'm afraid I'll bear this scar forever."

"I'm sorry, Deevee," Tash said sincerely. Deevee was the one who had saved her from Gog. He had jumped in front of a bolt from Gog's blaster meant for her. "If it weren't for you, I'd be nothing but a vapor cloud back in that space station."

Deevee sniffed. "Think no more of it, Tash. I was doing my duty as your caretaker." He looked at his battered body and sighed again. "Besides, although my outer shell has become rather unsightly, that blaster would have done you far more harm than it did me. Now, if it had been an ion cannon, that would have been another story."

"Ion cannon?" Tash asked.

Zak, a starship engine and weapon fanatic, jumped in. "An ion cannon attacks circuitry and electronics. Blasters just punch their way into whatever they hit. But ion weapons can really shred computers and servos."

Suddenly, the *Shroud*'s power systems kicked in. Tash and Zak blinked and Deevee readjusted his photoreceptors as the main lights came on and the ship began to hum with energy. Seconds later, without warning, the *Shroud* lurched away from its asteroid hideout and pushed its way into open space.

"Weird," Tash noted. "He must be in a hurry. He didn't even ask us to strap ourselves in."

Zak shook his head. "Figures. The one time he tells us where we're going, he finds some other way to be mysterious.

"Where *are* we going?" Deevee asked, as he tried to close a small panel on his chestplate.

Zak helped him close his chest panel. "Uncle Hoole says he's figured out where Gog's headquarters are. He's taking us there now. Someplace called Kiva. "

The droid tilted his head to the side. "Kiva? How fascinating. I've wanted to visit Kiva from the moment my anthropology research program was installed!"

"What's there?" Tash asked.

"Nothing!" Deevee said excitedly. "Well, to be precise, there's nothing there anymore." The droid slipped into his teacher mode, which meant a lecture was coming. He began: "Kiva is an example of how science can do great harm if caution is not taken. Years ago, there was a thriving culture on Kiva. The Kivans were known as the best artists and builders in the galaxy. There was also an Imperial base there, where scientists conducted secret biological experiments."

"Experiments," Tash groaned. "I've had enough of experiments, thanks."

"What kind of experiments?" Zak asked. He soaked up technological information like a sponge. But he was disappointed by Deevee's response.

"No one knows. The experiments were being conducted by a scientist named Mammon, but no one ever found out just what he was doing on Kiva. What we do know is that whatever he was doing went terribly wrong. There was some sort of accident, and the entire civilization on Kiva was wiped out." Deevee paused to let the terrible information sink in.

"Wiped out," Tash repeated sadly. "Kind of like Alderaan."

Zak nodded. The two Arrandas understood how terrible the loss of an entire planet could be. Their homeworld, Alderaan, had been destroyed by the Emperor's Death Star only eight months before. The Arrandas had lost their parents, their home, and their friends, all in one terrible moment.

Deevee continued. "The scientist, Mammon, was condemned by everyone, even the Emperor. He went into hiding and has never been heard from again. The planet became barren and the entire civilization of Kiva was lost."

"Maybe that's why Gog decided to build his headquarters there," Zak suggested. "Who would bother to look on a planet everyone knew was deserted?"

"Maybe," Tash agreed. She was kind of glad the place they were going was deserted, after everything they'd been through on

Nespis 8. She remembered that Nespis 8 was supposedly abandoned——but they'd had plenty of surprises there. Who knew what awaited them on Kiva? "Come on, let's get to the cockpit and help Uncle Hoole," she said to Zak.

Deevee's battered body whined a little as he walked, but otherwise he functioned normally as all three hurried back to the ship's control room. They offered to help, but Hoole had their course all set. There was little to do for the next few hours but watch the white, blurred lights of hyperspace rush past.

Finally, with a frown on his face, Hoole powered down the hyperdrive, and a planet the color of charcoal appeared before them.

"Kiva," Hoole said stiffly. "Don't worry, we will not be detected. This planet is lifeless."

"We know," Zak said. "Deevee told us all about Mammon."

Hoole raised an eyebrow at his droid. Anger crossed his usually unreadable face. "I would have thought you had better ways to waste your time than teaching them about dead planets."

Deevee was startled. "Master Hoole, I——"

"Never mind," Hoole snapped. "We're entering orbit."

Zak and Tash exchanged a quick glance. They had rarely heard Hoole snap at Deevee, and never when the droid was trying to teach them something.

The great ball of dark gray matter that was Kiva filled the entire viewscreen as the ship drew nearer. Tash stared down at the dark world, amazed at how barren it looked. Suddenly, a wave of fear swept through her like a warning.

"What's that?" she said, stabbing a finger at the view-screen.

"What's what?" Zak asked, alarmed by the fear in her voice.

"That!" Tash said again.

Then they all saw it. On the planet's surface, something glowed with sudden brightness. It was tiny, but clearly visible even hundreds of kilometers above the surface.

A sensor alarm bleeped. "Energy readings just went off the scale," Zak yelped.

"Something's attacking us!" Tash cried.

"Taking evasive action," Hoole responded, banking the *Shroud* hard to the right.

Too late.

An enormous energy beam streaked toward them, slamming into the ship with the light of a dozen suns. The *Shroud* spun to the right, and continued to spin even after the bright light vanished. Tash felt her stomach leap into her throat. They were falling. The ship lurched into a nosedive, and Tash was slammed against a wall. Through the spinning viewport, she could see the planet spiraling upward toward them.

"What's happening?" she yelled.

"No power," Hoole said. He was straining forward in the pilot's seat, trying to regain control of the ship. "We're out of control. We're going to crash!"

Chapter Three

We're going to die. That same thought gripped both Tash's and Zak's minds at the same time.

Neither one of them could speak. Their mouths and throats had gone dry, and all they could do was watch the surface of the planet grow closer by the second.

Zak knew there were procedures to regain ship control. There were steps to follow. But he was too terrified to remember them. Then he heard a calm voice speak over the sound of the atmosphere rushing past the ship's hull.

"Restarting repulsor engines," Hoole said aloud. "No response. Main circuits are off-line."

The planet's surface was very near now, but Hoole's voice was utterly calm. "Switching to backup circuit board." Zak heard something click. But it was too late. The planet rushed up to crush them. "Circuits are on-line. Restarting repulsor engines again."

A low groan rumbled through the ship. "Brace yourselves!" Hoole warned. "Engaging thrusters."

The ship's forward repulsors fired up, breaking against the overwhelming pull of gravity. Tash and Zak were thrown forward, slamming into the *Shroud*'s main console.

"By the Maker!" Deevee cried as he toppled over the copilot's chair. "I just put myself back together!"

The ship continued to fall, but it also began to slow down as Hoole gained more control.

"We're going to make it!" Tash cried.

"Not quite," Hoole said grimly. "Hold on."

Try as he would, he couldn't pull the ship out of its dive. All he could do was adjust the angle of their fall so they wouldn't slam right into the ground. The *Shroud* hit the surface of Kiva like a rock thrown across the surface of a lake——skipping once, twice, three times——then plowing over a rocky field as parts of the hull were torn off the ship's frame. The ship scraped across jagged mounds of stone that gouged long cuts into the tough metal.

Inside, the four passengers were thrown around. The room was filled with flying debris as equipment, datachips, holodisks, and everything else not tied down suddenly leaped into the air. Tash felt a datachip bounce off her forehead with the force of a small rocket. A moment later she blinked as a trickle of blood dripped into her left eye.

Finally, the ship came to rest.

Before Tash and Zak could climb to their feet, Hoole was standing over them. "No broken bones, no serious wounds," he said to each of them, then pressed a piece of cloth against Tash's cut. "Can you stand?"

They both nodded and the Shi'ido helped them up, then quickly turned to Deevee. "Are you functioning?"

Servos whined as the droid climbed to his feet. "It seems to defy the laws of physics," Deevee said, "but I'm still operational."

"Good," Hoole said, as though they hadn't just had a very close brush with death. "Please go check the engines for damage."

With that, Hoole began to check the cockpit equipment. Tash held the cloth against her forehead and watched her uncle. She had to admire his calm. Her hands were still shaking from the

crash, but Hoole was steady as a rock, running checks on all the systems.

"Oh, this is *not* prime," she heard Zak mutter.

Zak was looking at the floor just outside the cockpit. There was a gaping hole in the metal floorboards. It was so wide and deep that they could see straight through to the gray rock of the planet's surface. "I think this ship just found its permanent home," Zak said. "It sure isn't going to fly anywhere soon."

"I am afraid Zak is right," Hoole confirmed. "There are at least four major holes in the hull too big to repair. The crash took out almost every system, including the navicomputer. Even if the engines worked, we could not fly. This ship is dead."

They were marooned.

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A short while later, Zak, Tash, Deevee, and Hoole stood outside what was left of the *Shroud*. Each of them carried a small supply of food and water salvaged from the ship's galley, and Hoole pulled an emergency crash kit out of the wreckage. It contained two small tents and a cooking unit.

Zak had also insisted on bringing along as many of the ship's datachips as possible. The *Shroud*'s computer banks had been full of interesting information.

"It was a good ship," Zak sighed. "It got us through a lot of scrapes."

"Funny," Tash added. "This ship started out as part of Gog's plan. Now it's as if we've brought it home to him." Zak nodded unhappily at the memory of how they found the ship. The *Shroud* had belonged to one of Gog's henchman, another evil scientist named Evazan.

Hoole said, "Come. It's not a long walk, but we should start at once."

"Where are we going?" Zak asked.

"Just follow me," Hoole said.

The direction Hoole chose seemed no better or worse than any other. In fact, every direction looked the same. Kiva was absolutely dead, made up of kilometer after kilometer of dark gray rock under a roof of dark gray sky. Even the sun looked gray. The light was dim, but strong enough for huge, jagged pillars of rock to cast long shadows on the dry ground.

Zak stood next to one rock that was taller than he was. "These things look like giant teeth."

"Or frozen people," Tash added. "They're all over the place. Like millions of people, turned into rock."

"Be silent," Hoole warned sharply. Tash and Zak looked at each other and shrugged.

There was no sound, other than a sad wind that moaned through the rocks. Zak looked around. Something bothered him. But what was it? Then it hit him.

"No life," he muttered. He crouched down and stared at the ground, looking for the tiniest sign of growing things, a weed, or even a thorn. "There's nothing here. Not even a blade of grass."

"You're right, Zak," his sister replied. "This place makes Tatooine seem like a garden paradise."

"Well I hope there's *something* here," Zak said. "If we don't get help, or a ship, we're going to end up just like this place. Lifeless."

Tash pointed at Hoole, striding ahead of them. The Shi'ido had been traveling along at a steady pace since they stepped off the ship. "Well, he seems to think there's something here. How does he even know where we're going?"

Neither of them could answer that question.

Although Hoole had ordered them to be silent, Deevee chattered happily. "Master Hoole, this is a rare opportunity indeed!" the droid said as they hiked. "Why, you must know that there has been no serious study of the planet Kiva. Although I did read a paper once by an anthropologist from Circarpous 4..."

Tash stopped listening. A motion caught her eye. It was small——but on a planet with absolutely no life, she noticed it

right away. She thought she'd seen something step from behind one of the rocks. But when she turned to get a better look, all she saw was the rock's own shadow. She shrugged.

"...and according to the articles I've read," Deevee went on, "the Kivans may have left behind entire cities in the aftermath of Mammon's disaster..."

"I believe that is enough background, Deevee," Hoole said shortly.

"But, Master Hoole, surely you appreciate how interesting this planet must be to an anthropologist! It's a dead civilization."

"I know. I *am* an anthropologist," Hoole snapped. But he said nothing more.

A moment later something caught Tash's eye again. But when she turned again to look, there was nothing but shadows. For a moment, she thought she could see the shadows stretching toward them. But then she realized it was only the setting sun, making the shadows grow longer on the ground. Still, something had caught her eye...

"Uncle Hoole," she asked, "is it possible that there's still something alive here?"

"No," Hoole said definitely. "Every living thing on Kiva died."

"But I thought I saw something——"

"A trick of the light," the Shi'ido interrupted.

"But something fired at us," Zak said. "There's got to be someone here."

"Not someone. Something," Hoole said as they came to the top of a small hill. "Look."

On the other side of the hill, nestled in a small, barren valley, stood a large tower. An ion cannon was mounted atop the tower, its tip pointing up into the gray sky. The tower hummed with energy as it swiveled automatically on its base.

They walked down into the valley. Here, the shadows were even thicker.

"It is a computerized defense system," Hoole explained. "It's fully automated."

"How did you know that?" Tash asked.

Hoole shrugged. "The sensors picked it up just before we were hit." The Shi'ido looked at his niece and nephew. "So, as you can see, we are quite alone on this planet."

Uncle Hoole always has an explanation for everything, thought Tash, as she wandered away from him and Zak. She picked her way through the maze of toothlike rocks toward the ion tower. *It's so much darker here in the valley*——Tash couldn't believe how fast the shadows moved here. As

Zak's and Hoole's voices faded in the distance, Tash stood still, looking all around her, trying to see just how the rocks cast such weird, fast——moving shadows.

Suddenly, Tash screamed. Something had grabbed her by both wrists——she was being attacked!

Chapter Four

"Help!" Tash cried out.

Zak, Hoole, and Deevee ran toward the sound of her voice. But once they found her, all they could see were shadows cast by the rocks and Tash struggling with something invisible.

"Get it off me!" Tash yelled.

"What?" Deevee asked.

"The shad——!" she began. Then she was sucked into the darkness.

"Tash!" Zak yelled. He started forward, but stumbled. His foot had caught on something. Looking down, he saw that as he'd rushed forward, he had stepped into a shadow. Now his foot was stuck.

Hoole and Deevee had charged toward Tash, too, but seeing Zak, they stopped. "What's wrong, Zak?" Hoole asked.

"I don't know," Zak said. He tugged at his foot, but it wouldn't budge. "Something's got me." He tugged again. This time, something tugged back.

Zak was dragged forward into the shadow. In an instant, day turned into night. It wasn't the pitch-blackness of late night, but more like the darkness of evening, just after sunset. Zak could see the ground, he could see the sky, he could even see Hoole and Deevee, but everything lay under a shadowy *shroud*. His uncle

and Deevee were moving their arms frantically, and they seemed to be shouting, but Zak couldn't hear them. He called out to them, but he could tell that they couldn't hear him either. It was as if a dark, heavy curtain had dropped between them.

Mammon!

The word was whispered close to him, so close he felt something brush against his ear. Turning quickly, Zak saw only more shadows.

Mammon!

A second voice moaned in his other ear.

Zak turned again, and again saw nothing but shadows around him. A little farther away, deeper in the strange bubble of darkness, he saw his sister lying huddled on the ground. Zak started toward her, but every step took immense effort. It was like walking through a thick goo. It felt as though many hands were pushing against him, keeping him from getting near Tash.

"Tash!" he called out.

Tash lifted her head slowly.

"Zak...," she said weakly.

Mammonmammonmammonmammonmammon!

Angry voices swirled around Zak like a moaning wind, all of them repeating that same name over and over.

"Stop it!" Zak shouted, plugging his ears. "Leave us alone!"

*Murderer!*the voices cried.

"What?" Zak wasn't sure he had heard right.

Murderermurderermurderermurderermurderer!

"Who are you? What do you want?" he called out.

To his surprise, Tash answered him. She had managed to sit up and look at him through the fog. "They're angry, Zak," she mumbled. "They're so angry."

"Who?" he asked.

Something hard and sharp lashed out at Zak from the darkness, shredding the front of his tunic and just missing his skin. Something had attacked him *from* the darkness. No, not

something from the darkness, he realized. The darkness itself had attacked him!

"Help!" he shouted in panic. "Help!"

A moment later Hoole charged forward. As he did, the Shi'ido changed shape. The flesh crawled across his bones and an instant later Hoole had vanished, replaced by a huge, hairy bantha, its four legs pounding the ground and its sharp tusks raking the air as it charged.

The bantha crashed into the wall of darkness, storming straight at Zak. The bantha reared up, searching for enemies to strike.

But all that could be seen was darkness, and all that could be heard were the whispering voices as they moaned more ferociously than ever.

Mammon! Murderer! Mammon! Murderer! M-U-R-D-E-R-E-R!

The bantha paused. Its front feet came crashing down to the ground. It shivered violently, and a moment later Hoole returned to his normal shape. But he kept shaking, as though he were freezing cold.

"Uncle Hoole?" Zak called out. "Are you all right?"

Hoole fell to his knees, still shivering. He covered his face with his hands. "Oh, no," Zak heard his uncle mutter. "Oh... no."

Hoole's entrance into the ring of shadows had triggered something in the darkness. The shadows began to take a more solid shape. Zak could make out vaguely humanoid figures. He saw heads and arms the color of shadow, with bodies that melted into the darkness. They swarmed around Hoole and the two Arrandas, snarling the same words over and over.

Mammon!

Murderer!

"We've got to get out of here!" Zak yelled to his sister and uncle. Neither of them responded.

The creatures closed in. Through the gloom, Zak thought he saw dark claws reach out to grab Hoole's throat. He expected

Hoole to shapeshift into something large and fierce that could tear the weird creatures to shreds, but Hoole didn't even move.

Dark claws clutched at the Shi'ido's throat.

Suddenly, an energy blast tore through the darkness and slammed into the ground, turning the ring of shadows into a bright circle of light. Tiny bolts of lightning leaped up from the spot where the energy bolt had struck, wrapping themselves around the shadow creatures. Frightened screams filled the air, and then all the shadows fled.

Blinking from the bright light, Zak watched them go. The dark bubble burst, and the shadows slipped away into cracks in the rocks, shrinking until they vanished.

Deevee appeared at Zak's side. "Thank the Maker I managed to drive them off!" the droid said. "Are you all right?"

"What.." Zak tried to speak. "How...?"

"The ion cannon." Deevee pointed to the big laser tower. The cannon was now pointing directly at them. "It was the only large weapon within reach. I managed to override its automatic program and point it toward you, hoping it would frighten those creatures away."

Zak had to admire Deevee's cleverness. An ion weapon, since it only attacked electronic circuitry, would not do much damage to people. But it sure made a lot of light and noise!

"It did more than scare them," Zak said, remembering how they had screamed. "I think it hurt them."

By the time he had finished speaking, both Hoole and Tash were on their feet. Tash looked really upset. "I could feel them through the Force," she said. "Whatever they are, they're full of hate."

"No kidding," Zak replied, tugging at his torn shirt. "I could tell that *without* the Force. What were they?" he asked, looking at Hoole.

Hoole's face was very pale, and his eyes were still wide. It was the first time Zak or Tash could remember him looking at all afraid. Their uncle was obviously trying to hide his feeling, but he

couldn't. In a hoarse voice, Hoole said, "I do not know. But I'm sure that... it is not important to us."

"They kept saying the name 'Mammon,' " Zak remembered. "That's that scientist who destroyed this place, isn't it?"

"It is," Deevee replied, tilting his silver head. "That is most curious. I wonder"——he looked at Hoole——"could these beings, these wraiths, possibly be related to the original inhabitants of this planet?"

"Perhaps. It does not concern us," Hoole said. "Come. We should leave before they return. Our destination is very close."

Hoole turned away and started toward the far end of the little valley. The others followed slowly behind.

"Did you see him?" Zak whispered to his sister. "I've *never* seen Hoole act like that."

Tash nodded. "I don't know what's going on, but it has something to do with those... those 'wraiths.' Isn't that what Deevee called them?" She shuddered. "I'm telling you, Zak, they were furious. And their fury was directed right at us!"

"Why us?" Zak replied. "We've never done anything to them. We've never even been here before——"

"I have a theory," Deevee interrupted him. "Perhaps these creatures somehow survived the accident that destroyed their species. Maybe they call all offworlders 'Mammon.' "

"You could be right," Zak agreed, looking back at the valley. "But I hope I never see them again to find out."

They followed Hoole for another kilometer over the rocky terrain. As before, Uncle Hoole seemed to know exactly where he was going. He led them along winding paths in the hills, and through fields of tall, narrow rocks that rose from the ground like stone trees. Finally, they came to a narrow passage that led into a cliff. As they entered, they could see that they were in a dead-end canyon. At the far end of the canyon, Zak and Tash saw a large building that seemed to grow out of the stone itself.

The entrance to the fortress was a large durasteel door. It looked impossible to open. But to their surprise, Hoole walked

up to the control panel, punched in a security code, and watched as the door slid back with a soft *whoosh*.

"Just how much information did you find back on Nespis 8?" Tash asked him.

"Enough," the Shi'ido answered, stepping into the dark hallway beyond.

There were several chambers, and corridors leading off in many directions, but again, Hoole knew exactly where he was going. He led the others down a long corridor that led to the heart of the fortress, a large chamber in the center. In this chamber was an enormous command chair. Beside it was a control console, and above that was a row of view-screens.

"Is this——Is this really Gog's headquarters?" Tash whispered. "Is this where Project Starscream was created?"

"Yes," Hoole said. He walked to the far end of the room, where there was another door, but this time, when he punched a combination into the security panel, the door failed to open.

"Deevee," the Shi'ido called. "The power to this room is shut down."

"I'll take care of it, Master Hoole," the droid replied. Approaching the control console, Deevee studied it for a moment and then ran his metal hands over a series of controls. Moments later, there was a loud hum as the room's power systems started. The viewscreens lit up. But the monitors showed nothing but static.

"That's going to tell us a lot," Zak said.

"I shall see if I can make repairs," Deevee said. He punched a few commands into the computer program, then paused as lines of text appeared on the computer screen before him. "This is most unusual. Why, Master Hoole, I seem to have stumbled upon-"

"Wait, Deevee," Hoole interrupted. He was studying a computer terminal that had hummed to life. "I believe I've found the security codes that open this door."

Hoole entered a series of numbers into the computer, and the inner door slid open with a loud rumble. Tash and Zak looked up as the door retracted to reveal a wide chamber with high ceilings. The walls were lined with electronic equipment. Hundreds of pipes and cables led to the center of the room, where they all connected to a single object. It was taller than Hoole, and made of gleaming black metal.

"It looks like an egg," said Tash.

"An electronic egg," added Zak.

"It's a birth chamber," Hoole said.

"A birth chamber," Zak repeated. "A birth chamber for what?"

Hoole studied the large egg-shaped chamber. The polished black metal hummed with power. "I do not know," he said quietly. He touched a control panel on the egg.

Nothing happened.

Hoole frowned. "He has changed the codes," the Shi'ido muttered. "I cannot open it."

Zak grinned. "I bet I can crack that egg."

He reached into his pack and pulled out the datadisks he had salvaged from the *Shroud*.

"What are you doing?" Tash asked.

"This is all the information that was in the *Shroud*'s computers. I've been studying it every chance I get. I haven't exactly broken its code, but I'm close. Well, maybe not close, but I know enough to know a list of computer codes when I see one. I'll bet the entry code is here somewhere. If I can just find the right disk..."

Sorting through the disks, Zak jabbed one into a slot in the egg's control panel. Nothing happened.

Zak grunted and tried another.

Deevee shook his head. "Zak, the odds of finding a single bit of information in dozens of datadisks and selecting it as an entry code are well over six hundred fifty thousand to——"

"Got it," Zak said.

There was a bleep as the egg's computer accepted the disk Zak had inserted. A screech of metal followed... and then the egg cracked. Tash and Zak stepped back as the top half of the egg titled backward and light poured from the chamber with an electronic hiss.

Something inside the egg moved.

Shielding their eyes from the bright light, Zak, Tash, and Hoole stepped forward and squinted into the birth chamber.

Inside the egg was a baby.

Chapter Five

Zak asked the question they were all thinking. "Hey, there. What are you doing in there, little guy?"

The baby, who looked almost a year old, gazed up from a round padded bed in the center of the egg and squealed in delight. He had on a tiny pair of coveralls, the kind that infant boys often wore. His eyes twinkled, and his toothless grin reached from ear to ear.

"He's beautiful," Tash said, leaning into the chamber.

"Don't touch it!" Hoole commanded.

Tash raised her eyebrow. "Why? He's just a little baby."

"You do not know what he is," the Shi'ido replied. "Not when he comes from Gog's laboratory."

"You're just a sweet little baby, aren't you?" Tash cooed at the little boy. "And silly old Uncle Hoole is a worry wampa, isn't he?"

"Eppon!" the baby yipped.

"What's that?" Zak asked.

"Eppon!" the baby gurgled.

"Is that your name?" Tash chuckled.

"Eppon!"

"Works for me," Zak laughed. "Nice to meet you, Eppon."

Tash ignored Hoole's protests and pulled the little boy out of the chamber. The baby crawled into her arms and clung to her with a happy smile on his face. "Eppon!"

Hoole glowered. "Tash, I suggest you put the child down immediately. We have no idea what that creature is."

Tash returned her uncle's glare. "Uncle Hoole, how can you be so cruel? We can't just leave this little boy sitting in the middle of nowhere. He's a helpless baby."

But before Hoole could respond, the doors behind them exploded open.

Chapter Six

Zak and Hoole threw their arms up to protect their faces. Tash hugged Eppon close to her.

Smoke billowed up from the blasted door. Seconds later, a squad of soldiers leaped through the open door, blasters burning the air with energy bolts. The Empire had found them!

Then Zak spotted one soldier much taller than the rest. The figure roared as it shook its shaggy head. It was a Wookiee.

"Chewbacca!" Zak called out.

The Wookiee roared again.

"Cease fire!" a woman's voice commanded. The firing stopped immediately.

Following the Wookiee, three other figures stepped out of the smoke. There was a blond man, a darker man who moved with a confident swagger, and a beautiful young woman who had the clear eyes and proud bearing of a natural leader.

"Princess Leia!" Tash said excitedly. "Luke, Han! What are you doing here?"

Han Solo jammed his blaster back into its holster. "We could ask you the same question, kid. We haven't seen you since we all escaped from D'vouran."

Leia studied each of them, even Deevee, with a wry look on her face. "You four have a habit of showing up in the strangest places. I can only assume that this is no coincidence."

"As Han Solo said," Hoole replied, "we could say the same of you."

There were ten soldiers with the Rebel leaders, and Zak noticed the emblems on their uniforms. He recognized the Rebel symbol from smuggled news reports he'd seen on the HoloNet. "I knew it!" he said. "You guys *are* Rebels. I said so the minute we met you."

Hoole's dark eyes returned Leia's steady stare. "May I assume that you came here to learn more about Project Starscream?"

Leia was surprised, but only for a moment. "Actually, we came here to *destroy* Project Starscream. After D'vouran, we started investigating the Imperial Science Department and learned that the Empire was up to something——as they usually are. We finally learned the name Project Starscream and traced it to this planet."

"Only to find that you'd gotten here first," Luke Skywalker said. He winked at Tash, and she felt the Force flow between them, just as she had during their first meeting. It was a warm, electric tingle, as though she were on one end of a wire with Luke at the other. Together, they made a connection. "I knew there was more to you than meets the eye," he said, looking at Tash.

Zak's eyes lit up. "Hey, it's a good thing you guys are here. You can give us a lift off planet. Our ship was blasted by an ion cannon and we crash——landed."

Han jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Yeah, we got fried by the same weapons. Our ships hit the surface pretty hard about fifty kilometers back, but the *Millennium Falcon* isn't too badly damaged. Thanks to my flying."

Chewbacca barked something sarcastic. "Yeah, and Chewie's, too," Han translated. "Anyway, we left some technicians working

on the problem. The ship'll be ready to fly by the time we get back there."

"We can start just as soon as we make sure Project Starscream is destroyed," Leia said. "And, if possible, we'd like to question the being behind the project. Our sources tell us he's——"

"A Shi'ido named Borborygmus Gog," Hoole interrupted. "We know."

Leia's eyes widened. She was obviously impressed. Hoole continued. "But I'm afraid you won't be able to question him. He died several days ago. I'm sure that any vital information died with him."

"Sounds like you've got quite a story to tell," Han said, shaking his head.

"Later," Leia said. "Right now, we should check to make sure Gog is gone. Threepio! Artoo!"

A golden, humanlike droid, very similar to Deevee in shape, shuffled forward, trailed by a squat, barrel-shaped companion. Tash and Zak recognized C-3PO and R2-D2.

"Here, Your Highness!" the golden droid, Threepio, called out. "We were just, er, guarding the rear."

Artoo emitted a series of whistles and squeaks.

"Be quiet, Artoo!" Threepio said. "You couldn't guard your servos from rust!"

Leia ignored them. "Artoo, plug into the main computer. I want to know everything there is to know about Project Starscream."

With a cheerful bleep, Artoo rolled over to the computer console and jammed his interface plug into an open socket.

Hoole explained. "I had been conducting my own investigation from a different angle. We encountered Gog before I knew that his headquarters were here on Kiva. When we got here, this facility was abandoned and there was nothing left of the project."

"Except him!" Tash laughed, lifting the little boy onto her shoulder. He had grabbed hold of her single neat braid of blond hair and was tugging at it. "We found him in that egg chamber."

"And just who are you, little one?" Leia said, holding the baby's chubby face in her hands.

"Eppon!" the boy squealed.

"We think that's his name," Tash explained. "It's the only word he knows."

Leia ran her finger through a thick layer of dust gathered on top of the computer console. "This place looks as though it's been deserted for some time. How could the baby have survived?"

Hoole pointed at the egg-shaped chamber. "I believe that's the purpose of this chamber. It was meant to keep the child alive during Gog's absence."

"This Gog, he must have been planning to experiment on the baby," Han said, sneering. "These Imperials are slimier than Jabba the Hutt."

"Well, he seems to have met his fate before he could do anything to this little one," Luke said, tickling the baby under the chin. Eppon giggled.

Artoo let out an excited bleep.

"Your Highness," Threepio explained. "Artoo says that he has downloaded this computer's files into his memory banks. If there ever were any files on Project Starscream, they've been destroyed."

"I knew it," Hoole said. "Gog was too careful to leave records lying about. Whatever he was planning, he has taken it to his grave."

"Well, let's make sure we don't take it to ours," Luke said. "I want to get off planet before trouble finds us."

"Relax," Han said with a yawn. "What trouble would find us in this deserted place?"

A few hours later, Zak and Tash were hiking through the rocks of Kiva once more. They had warned the Rebels about the strange shadow creatures, so the group kept a sharp lookout as they traveled. Behind the two Arrandas marched the squad of ten Rebel soldiers. Luke Skywalker walked with Tash and Zak, while Hoole strode in front, talking in low tones with Princess Leia and Han Solo. Before them all stalked the mighty Chewbacca, his sharp Wookiee senses scanning the landscape for trouble.

Zak, Tash, and Luke Skywalker took turns holding the baby. Eppon tugged at their hair and ran his hands over their faces as he giggled and cooed.

"I do not know how we will care for this child," Hoole mused. "We have no way to feed him, unless he can eat the supplies we brought from our ship."

"No need to worry about that right now," Luke responded. "All he's starved for is attention. It's like no one has ever held him or hugged him before."

"That's sad," Tash said. "Maybe he's an orphan."

"In that case, I know how he feels," Zak said.

"Me too," Luke Skywalker added quietly.

"Well, he's not an orphan anymore!" Tash perked up. "He's got *us*." She held the baby up in the air. "Eppon, from now on Zak and I are your brother and sister, and you are officially part of the Arranda family."

"Eppon!" the baby squealed happily.

Eppon squirmed so much that Tash almost dropped him. "Ugh, he's getting heavy. Zak, ready for another turn?"

Zak wiggled his arms like they were wet noodles. "Not me. My arms are about to fall off. Luke?"

The blond Rebel shrugged. "Sorry, kids. I've got to go up front with Chewie. Maybe one of the commandos will take a turn. Hey, Rax!"

One of the Rebel commandos hustled forward. "Yes, sir?"

"You mind doing some baby-sitting duty?"

The commando sighed. They could tell he didn't like the idea, but Luke was a hero of the Rebellion, so Rax slung his blaster rifle over his shoulder and pulled little Eppon up into his arms. Eppon buried his head in the soldier's neck. "Eppon!"

"He likes you!" Tash laughed.

"Hurray," the soldier groaned.

They marched on.

Soon they came to a field of rocks, standing like a small stone forest. There were tall, thin rocks that rose higher than Hoole's head, and shorter, thicker ones that only reached Tash's waist. Although stones like this covered the planet, here they grew so thick that one person could barely slip between them.

Han Solo called a halt. "We can't go through there and still watch each other's backs," he explained. "We'll have to scatter and get through as best we can."

"Maybe we should go around," Leia suggested.

"We'd lose a lot of time," Han replied. "Besides, I doubt there's anything to worry about."

"I shall make certain," Hoole said.

He closed his eyes. At first, he seemed to shiver as if he were cold. Then the skin crawled across his bones, and in the blink of an eye, he had changed shape... into a long, thin serpent. The serpent was nearly transparent, and difficult to see in Kiva's gray light.

Artoo bleeped.

"Quite right, Artoo," Threepio replied. "As a crystal snake, Master Hoole will have no trouble scouting out those rocks." Threepio lowered his voice. "I'm just glad he's going in that direction, and not toward me!"

The crystal snake slithered off through the stone field, slipping quickly through the openings. A few moments later they caught a glint of light on the far side. There was a blur of motion, and the snake changed back into Hoole. The tall Shi'ido waved his arms. The path was safe.

Leia waved back. "Okay, everyone, break formation. Let's hurry through."

The Rebel commandos broke ranks, and they all started to pick their way through the rocky forest. Since they were the smallest, Zak and Tash slipped easily through the maze of rocks, and quickly made it to the other side where Hoole waited. They watched as, one by one, the Rebels reached their side of the field. In a few moments they had all arrived, except...

"Where's Rax?" Han asked.

"Where's Eppon'?" Tash asked.

"He was right behind me," one of the commandos said. "I thought he'd be——"

The Rebel didn't finish his sentence. A terrible scream ripped through the quiet air.

Everyone plunged back into the rock forest, running toward the direction of the scream. Zak and Tash were the first to arrive, followed closely by Hoole, Han Solo, and Luke Skywalker. What they found made them all gasp.

Lying on the ground was Eppon, curled up in a ball, sobbing. He looked like he had been dropped. Beside him lay Rax's blaster rifle, his clothes, his pack, and even his boots.

But the commando had vanished.

Chapter Seven

Everyone burst into action at the same time. The Rebel commandos drew their weapons and immediately began searching the area. Zak and Tash ran to pick up Eppon, while Hoole and the Rebel leaders gathered around the remains of their companion.

"Poor baby," Tash said. "He's got a bruise on his arm."

"He's tough, though," Zak said. "He's already stopped crying."

Beside them, Leia touched the commando's crumpled clothes. They were completely empty. Leia scratched her head. "What do you think happened here?"

"I don't know," Han answered, "but Rax was a well-armed and well-trained commando. He wouldn't have gone down without a fight."

"It looks like Rax was pulled right out of his uniform.

Hoole, could it have been one of those shadow creatures you mentioned?" Leia asked.

The Shi'ido shrugged. "I don't know. But they gave no indication that they had any such power."

Luke Skywalker frowned. "I've got a bad feeling about this place."

Chewie gave out a low, confused snarl, which Han translated. "Chewie says he doesn't smell anything. And there are no tracks. Whoever did this must be a ghost."

Tash glanced at Hoole, and saw a look of sorrow cross his face.

Before she could comment, Han said gruffly, "Rax was a good man. Come on, let's get going. I want to make sure we don't lose anyone else on this little hike."

The Rebels kept their weapons drawn as the group continued its march. But they heard and saw nothing.

"It's quiet," Tash whispered.

"As the grave," Zak agreed.

"Be silent," Hoole cautioned irritably.

Tash carried Eppon for a while; then, when they had marched about three kilometers from Gog's laboratory, she suddenly handed the baby boy over to Zak. "Will you hold him for a while?"

Zak pulled Eppon into his arms. "Sure... ugh! Is it me, or has he gotten heavier?"

"It's you, laser brain," his sister said. "You're just getting tired."

"I'm not *that* tired. He's putting on weight!"

"Without eating anything?" Tash shook her head. "Do you think you can manage anyway? I want to go talk to Luke."

"We'll be all right, won't we, little guy?"

"Eppon!" the little boy chirped.

Tash hurried past Uncle Hoole, Han, and Leia, to where Luke Skywalker walked with Chewbacca at the front of the group. They were walking a dozen meters in front of the others, making sure there was nothing unpleasant awaiting the Rebel band. Tash caught up to them just as they were about to enter a narrow passage between two high rock walls.

"Luke, could I ask you a question?"

Luke turned back from studying the path between the two stone cliffs. "What is it, Tash?"

She hesitated. There were so many questions she wanted to ask, so much she wanted to know about the Jedi Knights and the Force. She had reason to believe that she could use the Force. But she didn't know how. And ever since her first meeting with Luke, she had guessed that he was a Jedi, or at least knew a lot about them. It wasn't just because he carried a lightsaber——she could feel it, like an energy field that surrounded him.

"How much——How much do you know about the Force?" she finally asked.

"Not much," Luke confessed. "Just what an old friend told me. The Force is what gives a Jedi his power. It's a kind of energy field that binds the galaxy together. It connects all things."

"Is it——Is it like a weapon?" she continued.

Luke shook his head. "I don't think so. That's not the way to use the Force. Jedi Knights used it in battle, but the Force isn't a weapon like a blaster or a lightsaber. It's more like a power that helps you focus yourself and understand everything around you."

Tash asked, "Can you use the Force?"

Luke shrugged modestly. "A little, I think. That's why I'm up here with Chewie. I don't have his sense of smell, but I sometimes get feelings. Kind of like an inner alarm."

"Yeah!" Tash said excitedly.

Luke raised an eyebrow. "Do you get that feeling?"

Now it was Tash's turn to shrug. "Well, I guess——"

Before she could answer, Chewie let out an ear-shattering roar. At the same time, Luke's eyes went wide with alarm, and he yelled, "Get down!" He dropped to the rocks, pulling Tash down with him just as a blaster bolt screamed through the air overhead.

Chewbacca roared another warning, and Tash didn't need Han Solo to tell her what he was saying.

"Ambush!" she repeated, as blaster bolts fell like an energy storm around them.

The Rebel company dove for cover among the rocks. One commando was too slow, and a blaster bolt struck his chest, spinning him around.

"Return fire!" Leia ordered. The air quickly grew hot from crisscrossing energy bolts.

"Who would be on a lifeless rock like this?" Han asked. "Pirates? Smugglers?"

"Worse," Leia said. "Look!"

On the path ahead of them, they could see figures slowly advancing. The figures were dressed in white armor, and white helmets masked their faces.

Stormtroopers.

"What's the Empire doing here?" Han complained.

"I don't know," Leia said. "But at least that answers our questions about Rax. The Imperials must have got him somehow."

"Why would they have left his clothes and equipment?" Luke asked, then ducked as a blaster bolt flashed overhead.

"Ask *them*!" Han shouted back. "All I want to know is how they found us."

"Maybe they tailed us," Luke called out from behind a rock.

"No way. No one followed me!" Han stated.

"I am afraid they may be after *us*," Hoole said. "We thought we had escaped some Imperial pursuers before we came here. Perhaps I can help. I can shape change into a creature that will—__"

"I think that would be a very bad idea," Han said. "Look!"

They all looked up the path again. The stormtroopers scurried about, trying to remain hidden from Rebel blasters while they advanced. But one ominous figure stepped into the open and strode forward. His armor was as dark as his heart, and his cape swirled around him like a shadow.

"Darth Vader!" Leia shouted. "Fire!" she ordered.

The Rebels opened fire, pouring energy beams on the Dark Lord of the Sith. From his hiding place, Zak watched the blaster bolts streak toward Vader and figured that the Dark Lord was doomed. But Vader simply waved one gloved hand, and the

blaster bolts changed course. They scattered like leaves blown by the wind.

"What the——?" Zak cried. "That's impossible!"

"We've got to stop him," Han growled.

"I've got an idea," Leia said. She raised her blaster, not at Vader, but at the rock wall above him, and fired. The blaster bolt struck the wall, blowing out a chunk of rock. More rocks followed it, and in moments a small avalanche of stones tumbled down onto the path right in front of Vader. When the dust settled, they saw that the falling rocks had blocked the path.

"Nice shooting, Leia!" Tash cheered.

"Not bad, Your Royalness," Han Solo admitted.

"It won't hold Vader back for long," Leia said. "We've got to do something."

"He must be after me," Luke said. "He's wanted revenge since we destroyed the Death Star."

"If that's true, then we should send Hoole, Zak, and Tash away," Leia said. "The ship should be repaired by now, and they'll be safer there. Vader won't bother them if he's after us."

"We can't just leave you!" Tash argued.

"This is our fight, Tash," Luke said calmly. "Vader is more powerful than you can imagine. You've got to get out of here. We'll hold the Imperials off as long as we can."

Hoole shook his head. "We cannot allow you to risk your lives on our account."

"Hey, risking my life for other people's problems has become a hobby," Han smirked.

Leia pointed to four of the Rebel commandos. "Sikes! Bergan! Tino! Meex! Front and center!"

The four commandos hustled forward. "You guys have a new assignment. Get these civilians safely back to the ships. If we haven't joined you in four hours, blast off this planet and don't look back."

"Yes, Your Highness!" said the commandos.

"We're leaving," Hoole said. "Where's the child?"

"I hid him over here where it was safe from the blaster fire," Zak said. "He's right behind this rock."

Zak stepped behind the rock, and gasped.

The baby was now a little boy.

Chapter Eight

"I cannot claim to be an expert," said Deevee, "but I believe this rate of growth is impossible for human children."

"A little while ago he was about a year old," Zak said. "Now he looks like he could be three."

"Eppon!" the little boy squeaked.

"No time to worry about it," the commando named Meex said. "I'll carry him." He scooped the boy up' easily and the small party started off.

In order to put distance between them and the Imperials, they doubled back until they reached the field of stones. There, they turned left, and started to pick a new trail back over the tough, rocky terrain of Kiva. The commandos thought they could still reach the ships in an hour or two.

Tash and Zak looked back a few times as they hurried away from the battlefield. The Imperials must have broken through the avalanche, because blaster fire had started up again.

"I hope they're all right," Tash whispered.

"I'm sure they will be," Hoole said. "As for us, we've done what we came here to do. Gog's headquarters are abandoned. Now we must get off this planet as soon as possible."

"You don't suppose we're in any more danger, do you, Master Hoole?" Deevee worried. "After all, I assume it was the Imperials

who were responsible for the disappearance of that first commando."

"Perhaps," Hoole said. "But there are other dangers."

The Shi'ido pointed to a large gully on their right. At first Tash didn't see anything. Then she realized that the gully was full of shadows. And the shadows were moving.

"Wraiths," she whispered.

"Indeed," Hoole said coldly. "They have been following us since we left the abandoned laboratory."

Tash was surprised. "And you didn't say anything?" Hoole didn't answer.

The Rebel commandos had spotted the strange shadows, too. They picked up the pace. "Our landing point is only a few more kilometers from here," said Meex. "If we hurry, we can——"

"They're attacking!" one of the other commandos cried.

The shadows closed in. They did so slowly and steadily, moving just like a shadow growing longer in the afternoon.

The small group tried to look for a way to escape, but every path was blocked by darkness.

The shadows began to wail.

Murderer!

Mammon!

Killer!

Mammon!

KillerkillerkillerkillerkillerkillerKILLER!

One of the shadows seemed to rise off the ground. It reared up like a figure made of solid darkness, and lunged forward.

The commandos fired their weapons, and the blaster bolts shrieked into the dark curtain. The whispering turned to angry snarls, but nothing else happened.

"Blasters are useless," said Meex. "Try thermal detonators.

Another commando pulled a fist-sized metal ball from his belt and tossed it into the darkness. "Everybody down!"

They all crouched and shielded their eyes as the grenade exploded. Brilliant white light flashed around them for a

moment, driving the shadows away. But the shadows came back as the light faded, and came toward them again.

The Rebel commandos made a small circle with Hoole, Deevee, Zak, and Tash squeezed into the middle. Only a few meters of light separated them from the wraiths. Tash could see the wraiths in their own darkness, angry figures writhing about, gathering themselves to attack. And she could feel them, too. They were angry. She sensed that anger was all they had left. It was the only part of them that was still alive.

Murderer! Murderer!

The commandos fired several more shots into the shadows, but it was no use.

"Uncle Hoole, what should we do?" Zak asked.

Hoole didn't answer. He stood stone still, staring into the darkness. His eyes seemed very far away. He seemed to be waiting.

Tash turned to Meex. "What should we do?"

The commando shook his head. "Blasters don't work. Grenades don't work. I sure don't want to fight these things hand to hand, whatever they are."

"Do you have any ion weapons?" Zak asked.

Meex raised an eyebrow. "Well, yeah, we've got a portable ion gun. It's used to fight off attacking airships. But ion weapons don't do any good against living creatures."

Zak nodded. "It will against these. Hurry!"

"Bergan!" Meex snapped. "Tino! Assemble the ion gun. On the double!"

The two commandos pulled open their packs and dumped out several large pieces of equipment. In a few seconds, they had snapped the pieces together to form a small cannon mounted on legs.

"Seems like a waste of time," Meex said. "But here goes. Fire!"

The commandos pointed their ion cannon at the shadows and fired. White bolts of energy punched the gathered wraiths. Then screams burst from the darkness, and the shadows parted.

"That's done it!" Meex cheered. "Fire at will!"

The cannon fired again and again. The shadows fled screaming in terror, but the commandos kept firing.

To everyone's surprise, Hoole suddenly snapped out of his trance. He bellowed, "Stop! Stop your firing! Do not harm them! Stop!"

The Rebels were trained to follow orders, but not Hoole's orders, so they kept firing.

The wraiths scattered and vanished among the rocks, but the Rebels trained the ion cannon on one of the fleeing creatures and poured fire on it. The wraith shrieked and fell. It lay there like a pool of dark liquid collecting on the rocky ground.

"Got one!" the Rebels cried.

"No!" Hoole moaned.

Cautiously, the group approached the fallen wraith. It was a strange sight to see, a shadow curled up on the ground. Zak kept expecting to see someone standing nearby, a person to cast the shadow, but there was nothing. Just the shadow.

These creatures must be made of energy, Zak thought. *That's why the ion cannon affects them.*

The wraith stirred.

"Watch it!" Meex ordered. "It could still be dangerous."

"I don't think so," Tash replied.

Writhing and squirming like boiling water, the wraith formed itself into a humanoid shape. They could see the outline of two arms, shoulders, and a head. Out of the head came a weak, fading voice.

Murderer.

Tash was the first to speak. "Why did you attack us? Why do you call us 'murderer'?"

*Killer,*the wraith snarled. *We seek revenge!*

"Revenge?" Zak replied. "Why on us?"

We demand justice! We must avenge ourselves on the one who destroyed all life on our planet. The one who turned us into shadow creatures! We will kill you!

Tash pointed to herself and her companions. "But you've got it wrong. We didn't harm your people."

Not you, the wraith whispered, stabbing one shadowy arm forward. *Him!*

The wraith pointed directly at Uncle Hoole.

Chapter Nine

The silence that followed the wraith's words was terrible.

Tash thought she could hear her own heart pounding in her chest. Beside her, Zak tried to steady himself so that he wouldn't fall over.

What did it mean?

Hoole stood with his eyes downcast. His face was as sad and gray as the sky above them.

Finally, Zak spoke. He looked at the shadow creature. "Th-There's got to be a mistake."

The wraith's voice had faded even more. *No. He is the killer. He destroyed my people.*

"Uncle Hoole," Tash pleaded, "tell him he's wrong. Tell him there's been a mistake."

The frown on Hoole's face deepened. Suddenly, he looked very old, and very, very tired. He opened his mouth to speak, but at that moment, the wraith let out an angry hiss. A moment later the wraith itself vanished. All that was left was a cold, dark stain on the rocky ground.

Hoole closed his mouth without speaking. Then he did the last thing Zak and Tash expected.

He turned and walked away.

"Uncle Hoole?" Zak called out in surprise.

Hoole did not turn around. Stunned, they watched him go. In a few seconds, he had disappeared among the rocks.

"Deevee," Tash asked the droid, "where's he going? Should we follow him?"

The silver droid slowly shook his mechanical head. "I do not know, Tash. I truly do not know."

The commando Meex finally spoke. "Wherever he's going, it's a security breach. My orders are to get you to the ships, and that's what I'm gonna do. Tino and Bergan, you stay with the equipment and the ion cannon. Watch the kid, Sikes. The rest of you, you're with me."

"We should stay with Eppon," Tash said.

"No, I may need you to help me find your uncle," Meex ordered.

"What about the wraiths?" Deevee asked.

Meex grimaced. "Sounds like those creatures are after Hoole, not us. We won't have to worry about them unless we find him. Which is what we're going to do right now. Let's go!"

But Meex was wrong. They did not find Hoole, even though Zak, Tash, and Deevee helped search. After half an hour of looking and finding nothing, they decided to give up.

Meex agreed. "Tough to find someone who doesn't want to be found."

"Especially when that someone's a Shi'ido," Zak added, kicking a rock in frustration. "He could shapeshift into a rock mouse and hide from us. We'd never find him."

"What's wrong with him?" Tash asked Deevee. "He's been acting strange ever since we arrived here. Why didn't he help us the first time the wraiths attacked?"

"And why didn't he want the commandos to shoot them?" Zak added.

"And why didn't he explain to the wraiths that they had made some sort of mistake?" Tash finished. "Do you think..." She swallowed. "Do you think Uncle Hoole really could be responsible?"

Zak shook his head. "No way. There's got to be a mistake."

Deevee paused. "I may know the answers. But it will take some time to explain."

"Then it'll have to wait," Meex insisted. "We'll go back and get my men and the kid, then start marching again. You can tell your story when we're safe."

As they hurried back to find the others, Tash was filled with a growing sense of fear. It was like a knot tightening in her stomach. She knew what it meant.

"We've got to hurry," she said as they all stumbled through the rocky terrain. "We're in danger."

"I-I think I know what you mean," Zak said. "I've got a really bad feeling about this place."

For a few seconds, the air of Kiva was filled with the sounds of their running feet. Then another sound broke through the silence. It was the sound of terrified human voices calling out in the distance.

"No! Help!" the voices cried.

"That's Bergan and Tino!" Meex yelled.

A single blaster shot echoed through the air, followed by more cries. "No! *Ahhhh!*"

Then the silence fell again.

"Come on!"

They found what was left of all three commandos. Bergan's, Tino's, and Sikes's clothes and equipment lay in a pile, as though their bodies had vanished into thin air.

"No sign of struggle, no blood, no nothing," Meex growled. "What is going on here?"

"Where's Eppon?" Tash asked, panicked.

"Eppon!" came a small peep.

The little boy had crawled into a dry riverbed near them. He giggled and toddled toward Tash, who picked him up. "I'm glad you're all right, little one," she whispered.

"How'd he get in there?" Zak asked. "Not too long ago he could barely crawl."

"Perhaps one of the soldiers tossed him in there when the wraiths attacked," Deevee suggested. "That's how the boy escaped injury."

"He didn't totally escape," Tash noted. "Look at this."

There was a purple bruise the size of a bird's egg on Eppon's forehead. It had already swelled up. "Poor Eppon," Tash cooed.

"Eppon!" the baby echoed.

"We've got to get out of here," Meex stated.

Tash bristled. "Not without Uncle Hoole."

Meex was about to reply sharply, when Zak stepped between them. "Tash, with the ship's onboard sensors, we could scan the entire planet for Hoole. It would be faster."

Tash wasn't sure, but replied, "Well, if you say so, Zak."

Deevee offered to carry Eppon on his back. Using strips of cloth from Sikes's uniform, they rigged a crude sack, placed Eppon in it, and slung the bag over Deevee's metallic shoulders.

"Ready?" Tash asked.

"I should think so," Deevee replied. "I'd like to reach safety before it gets dark."

Tash looked up at the sky. It was the same dull gray they'd seen when they first arrived. "The light hasn't changed. I don't think it's ever nighttime here. It's always twilight."

Meex packed up the ion cannon and prepared to move. "Double time," Meex ordered. "Let's go!"

At first Zak and Tash had no trouble keeping up with the pace the commando set. But soon their breath started to come short, and their feet started to feel as heavy as planets. Zak was ready to collapse at any moment. Deevee suddenly let out a cry of alarm and stumbled to his knees with a crash of metal arms and legs. The makeshift sack holding Eppon flew off his shoulders and landed in a heap beside him.

"By the Maker!" said the droid. "I think I've dented myself. And so soon after being repaired!"

"You dropped Eppon!" Tash scolded, running over to the pile of rags.

Zak helped the droid get to his feet. "What happened, Deevee?"

"I don't know, Zak," the droid replied. "I was hurrying along when suddenly my balance gyros malfunctioned. I can't imagine why."

"I can," Tash said. "Look!"

She had pulled the rags and knots from around little Eppon. Except that he wasn't very little anymore. He had grown larger, and now looked about four or five years old. He had sleek black hair that reached down to his shoulders and very dark eyes. His skin was smooth and pale, except where the ugly bruise, which had gotten bigger, covered his forehead.

"This isn't natural," Meex said suspiciously.

"I must agree with you," Deevee said. "Obviously, we did not rescue this child before Gog began his experiments. Something has been done to the poor boy."

Meex took a step forward. "I hate to say it, but maybe that kid is more trouble than he's worth."

Tash pulled Eppon closer to her. He was now almost too heavy to lift, but she hugged him tight. "No! There are obviously plenty more dangerous things in this place."

Zak came to his sister's defense. "So what do you want to do, just leave Eppon out here? Let him die of thirst? Look at him! He's still just a kid." Zak looked into Eppon's eyes. "Eppon, can you talk? Can you say anything? Is your brain growing just like your body?"

For an answer, Eppon simply smiled as sweetly as a newborn baby and laughed. He hugged Tash. "Eppon!"

Meex's face softened, and Zak and Tash could tell they'd won the argument.

Eppon had grown out of the tiny coverall he'd been dressed in. Meex grudgingly pulled a tunic out of his pack. It was far too large for Eppon, but they rolled up the sleeves, and tied it around the waist with a length of cord. It looked like an enormous robe, but it did the job, and they started off again.

They hurried on under a dark cloud. Tash and Zak were concerned about Uncle Hoole. They were all worried about who might vanish next. Only Eppon seemed unaffected. He still could not speak, but he laughed and skipped along beside Tash, croaking "Eppon!" at anything that interested him.

Their gloom lifted slightly as they scrambled up a rocky hill and saw, on the far side, two starships nestled in a dry, dusty field. One of the vessels was a simple cargo ship. The other was shaped like a saucer, and looked like it had been strung together with glue and good luck. But those who recognized it knew that it was one of the fastest ships in the galaxy.

"The *Millennium Falcon* ," Zak said admiringly.

"Safety!" Deevee sighed. "At last."

Meex nodded, "Let's hope the technicians have made all the repairs."

They ran down the slope and hurried to the ships. Meex called out, but there was no reply. They checked the *Millennium Falcon* . No one was aboard.

Tash shuddered, thinking of the wraiths. "Do you suppose——?"

"You stay here," Meex ordered. "I'm going to check out the other ship."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Zak argued. "We should stick together. Maybe we could fly one of these ships to get the others, and then scan for Uncle Hoole."

"Not until I find out what happened to the crew we left here," Meex said. He looked suspiciously at Eppon. "If the wraiths got them, I want proof."

Through the *Falcon*'s cockpit window, Tash, Zak, and Deevee watched Meex creep slowly to the other ship, moving quietly, his weapon drawn. Meex reached the ship and pressed himself against the hull, holding his blaster steady. Then he opened the hatch, and quickly jabbed his blaster inside.

Nothing happened.

Cautiously, he slipped inside the cargo ship.

Tash and Zak waited for three minutes. Five minutes. Seven minutes.

When ten minutes had passed, Tash whispered, "It seems like we've been waiting forever. Should we go after him?"

Zak shook his head. "Not yet."

Eppon's eyes were riveted on the other ship. "Eppon," he whispered.

"What if he doesn't come back?" Tash wondered aloud.

"At least we're safe for the moment," said Deevee.

"Eppon!" Eppon suddenly shouted. Before they could stop him, he scampered out of the cockpit and toward the exit.

"Stop!" Tash and Zak yelled, starting after him. "Wait!" Deevee called out.

Tash and Zak were faster, and they reached the hatch ahead of the droid. They dashed outside to see Eppon streaking toward the other ship. They were both surprised at his speed——hours ago Eppon couldn't even walk. Now he was running faster than any five——year-old possibly could.

"Eppon, stop!" the two Arrandas yelled.

They were so busy watching the boy, they did not notice the shadows creeping toward them.

"What's he doing?" Tash gasped to Zak.

"What makes you think I know?" Zak retorted. "I can't even see him anymore. He ran into the shadow of the ship."

Zak pulled up short, his heart suddenly leaping into his throat.

The shadow of the starship had suddenly grown enormous.

And it was still growing.

In seconds, the giant shadow had surrounded them. "Oh, no."

That was all Zak had time to whisper before a great wave of darkness rose up and fell crashing down around them, and everything went black.

Chapter Ten

Zak had no idea why he had passed out, or how much time had gone by since he did. All he knew when he awoke was that his arms and legs felt heavy, like he was waking from a deep sleep. The back of his head was sore——he felt like he'd been using a rock for a pillow. His eyes were closed, and it was very dark. He opened his eyes.

The darkness didn't go away.

Zak blinked to make sure his eyes were really open. The darkness around him was complete. It was darker than a deep hole, darker than deep space itself.

"Where am I?" he said aloud.

A thousand whispering voices answered him at the same time. *You are in the heart of our misery! You are at the center of our hatred!*

Zak felt the wraiths moving all around him. When they brushed over his skin, it felt like a sudden gust of warm, musty air. Zak knew that the wraiths could tear him to shreds at any moment. He shuddered.

His hand touched something soft beside him. It was cloth. Groping about, he felt Tash's hand. He found her shoulder and shook it gently. "Tash. Tash!"

Although she was less than an arm's length away, he could not see her, but he heard her stir. "Zak?" she muttered drowsily.

"Zak, where are we?" Then, her voice trembling, she said, "Oh, no. The wraiths."

Zak nodded. "They've got us."

Zak and Tash stood up together, holding hands. They felt stone beneath their feet, and knew that they were standing somewhere on Kiva. But everywhere they looked, they could see nothing but darkness.

"What do we do now?" Zak wondered.

"I don't know," Tash replied from the darkness. "We've lost Uncle Hoole. We've lost Deevee. Meex is gone. Eppon ran away. We're——We're alone again."

Zak squeezed her hand. "Not while we've got each other." His voice hardened. "Maybe we can fight our way out of here."

"No, we shouldn't fight them, Zak," Tash said firmly. "Whatever these creatures are, they're angry, they're full of pain. Something terrible happened to them, and for some reason they blame us. We've got to make them understand that we don't mean any harm."

Zak felt a wraith pass close by, its shadowy form brushing the back of his neck with a hiss. He shivered. "I'll try anything."

Tash called out, "We haven't done anything to you. We're not your enemy!"

Murderers! Children of the murderer! a thousand voices replied. Listen to us! Once, a beautiful civilization thrived on Kiva. Now nothing is left but our tortured spirits.

"Maybe we can help," Tash offered.

Her words caused a violent hiss to crisscross the darkness. When it stopped, the voices mocked, *Help? Help? Years ago, strangers came to Kiva offering help. They promised to make us great and powerful. Instead, they destroyed us! All our people were wiped out! They disintegrated our bodies, leaving only our shadows.*

"We're sorry!" Zak yelled. "We know how terrible that must have been."

*You cannot know!*the shadows wailed. *Have you ever lost your whole world?*

"Yes, we have!" Tash cried out. "The Empire destroyed our homeworld, Alderaan. We lost everything!"

Her words caused a strange reaction. The darkness seemed to swirl about itself, suddenly confused. The wraiths whispered among themselves. Finally, one voice spoke above the others.

But you came here with the murderer! You are the children of Mammon!

"No, we're not!" Zak said. "We didn't come here with any murderer. Who are you talking about?"

"They are talking," replied another voice out of the darkness, "about me."

The darkness parted like a curtain, and into the center of the black circle stepped a solitary figure with slumped shoulders and a tortured look on his face.

It was Uncle Hoole.

Chapter Eleven

The wraiths closed around Hoole, leaving him and the Arrandas in the dark.

*Murderer! Killer! Revenge! Revenge!*the voices chanted.

"Uncle Hoole?" Tash asked, reaching out to him. She found her uncle's hand and held it. "What do they mean? What's going on here?"

"It's time you knew the truth about me." Hoole's voice drifted from the darkness. The strong, commanding tone Zak and Tash were used to was gone. In its place was a quiet whisper, telling them a sad story.

"Zak, you once pointed out that I had never told you and Tash my name. I was Hoole, and that was all you needed to know. The truth is that I abandoned my first name years ago. I tried to leave it buried in the past."

There was a pause. "My first name is Mammon."

The shadows hissed.

Hoole continued. "Almost twenty years ago I was a scientist. I thought I was brilliant, and I wanted to become famous in the field of genetics. I didn't want to just clone things. I wanted to create life.

"When the Emperor came to power, I saw my opportunity. The Empire encouraged research in new areas of science.

Another scientist and I were given millions of credits by the Empire and allowed to begin our experiments."

"You worked for the Empire?" Tash said, hardly believing it. "Didn't you know how evil the Empire was?"

"No," Hoole replied. "No one knew how evil the Emperor was until it was too late. Besides, I was too busy with my research. Eventually, we finished our basic experiments. We needed more room, a larger facility. To create life out of nothing, we learned, we would need an incredible amount of energy. The Emperor built a huge laboratory here, on Kiva. Here, we explored the secrets of life itself."

Hoole took a deep breath before continuing his story, as the wraiths continued to hiss and swarm around them.

"We created huge generators that could focus the power of an entire star into one tiny test tube. But we lost control of our experiments. Instead of creating new life, we let loose a blast of energy that swept across the entire planet, wiping out every living thing."

"And then you just left these wraiths to suffer?" Zak asked.

Hoole shook his head. "No. I had no idea that the Kivans survived at all. The accident... it happened so fast. I tried to broadcast a warning, but the energy we released disrupted the transmission. My partner and I barely escaped before the explosion."

A terrible thought snaked its way into Tash's mind. She tried to hold it back, but it was too strong, too terrible. Several old, nagging questions repeated themselves in her brain.

How had Hoole known about Project Starscream and its leader?

How did so many underworld figures like Boba Fett and Jabba the Hutt know Hoole?

How did Hoole know where Gog's headquarters would be?

Finally, she asked the question, afraid of hearing the answer. "Who was your partner? Who was the other scientist?"

Hoole's voice was filled with agony. "It was Gog."

"No," Tash said.

"That's impossible," Zak said. "This is all some kind of terrible lie. It can't be true. Gog nearly killed us, and you *worked* with him?" His voice became shrill with anger.

"Zak, Tash, there's more to the story——"

"I don't care!" Tash said, her voice cracking. "You lied to us. And what's worse," she choked, "you destroyed an entire planet. All these creatures——you turned them into nothing but ghosts. What you did... it was as bad as what the Empire did to Alderaan!"

"All that you say," said Hoole, "is true."

Zak broke in, his voice full of bitterness. "I'll bet that's why you wanted to take care of us. When Alderaan was destroyed, it reminded you of your own crime. You felt guilty. You didn't take us in because you cared about us. You just wanted to make yourself feel better!"

Hoole said nothing.

The shadows closed in. The wraiths pressed about them so thickly that they became almost solid.

The voices declared, *Years ago we swore vengeance. Today we shall have it. The murderer Mammon will be punished for his crimes.*

"What are you going to do to him?" Zak asked.

Before we were destroyed, our laws stated that victims had the right to confront those who harmed them. Thousands upon thousands died here because of him. He will stand here, and be forced to hear the agonized voices of each person he destroyed.

Tash and Zak both shuddered.

The voices continued. *And then, when Mammon has seen all the misery he has caused, he will be executed!*

Chapter Twelve

He will be executed!

The phrase was repeated over and over again, carried through the shadows by hundreds and thousands of voices. Hoole remained as still as stone.

Tash and Zak felt shadowy hands grab them. They were pushed from behind and pulled from the front, carried away from Hoole. Seconds later, the shadows parted, and Tash and Zak found themselves standing in the gray light of Kiva once again, not far from where the *Millennium Falcon* had landed.

Turning quickly around, they saw, in the center of the valley, a huge, quivering shadow-dome like the one they'd seen earlier. Only this time they were on the outside.

For a moment, the two Arrandas just stood there, dazed. Neither of them knew exactly how to feel. Hoole had taken them in, he had cared for them. He had even saved their lives, more than once. But he had also kept a terrible secret from them.

Zak was the first to speak. "I can't believe it."

"He lied to us," Tash said.

"He-He's a murderer."

"Worse than a murderer," Tash said. "A planet-killer." She paused. "But he's still our uncle."

Zak nodded. "He's done so much for us. And he's still in there. They're going to kill him! What do we do?"

Tash shook her head. "He didn't seem to want to be saved. And I'm not sure we could save him. Maybe we should go back to the ships to find Deevee and Eppon. Then figure out what to do."

Zak felt numb. "We can't just leave him in there."

"What choice do we have?" his sister replied.

Zak had no answer.

Together, they started back toward the *Millennium Falcon* . Neither of them spoke. Neither of them wanted to admit the horrible truth going through both their minds: they weren't sure they *wanted* to save Hoole.

They reached the Falcon and the cargo ship. As they approached, two figures hurried toward them. One shone silvery in the gray light. The other looked like Eppon except...

"He's bigger!" Zak groaned.

"It appears to be true," Deevee agreed. "I found the boy again only a few minutes after you vanished. He had already grown to this size. Fortunately, I was able to locate a spare jumpsuit in the cargo ship. It fits him rather well."

Zak stood next to the mysterious boy. "I'll say. He's bigger than me."

It was true. Eppon had grown into a teenage boy. His hair now reached well past his shoulders. His face had lost all its baby fat, and he had started to develop strong muscles in his arms. Even his voice had changed.

"Eppon!" he said in a deep-throated bark.

"That mark is bigger, too," Tash noticed. The purple bruise on his brow had spread. It covered most of his forehead now and looked like it was spreading down his face. "It looks bad. What do you think it is, Deevee?"

Deevee shook his head. "My knowledge of biology is limited. Also, based on his rapid rate of growth, I would say this boy is

not entirely human, so I cannot say for sure what illness he might have."

The only thing that hadn't changed about Eppon was the twinkle in his eye for Zak and Tash. He smiled at them both and said again, "Eppon!"

Deevee was equally delighted to see them. "I thought I'd never see you two again! What happened?"

They hurried into the Falcon as Zak and Tash explained how the wraiths had captured them. When they got to the part about Hoole's confession, Deevee did not seem surprised. "I must confess that I had my suspicions," the droid said.

Zak's eyes went wide. "What? How long have you——?"

"Not long," the droid explained. "In fact, I had no idea until a few hours ago. It was the droid Artoo-Detoo who told me. Do you recall how he plugged into the fortress computer?"

"Yes," Tash said. "He said he couldn't find any files about Project Starscream."

Deevee nodded. "That is true. But he did find some old files from twenty years ago. They revealed that two Shi'ido had been running the experiments that destroyed Kiva. After that, I put my highly efficient computer brain to work. However, I wasn't completely sure until you told your story."

Tash shook her head. "All this time. We were with him all this time, and we never knew that he had done such a terrible thing."

Deevee's photoreceptors focused on her. "You should know that there's more to the story than that. In fact, Master Hoole——"

Deevee was interrupted by an ear-shattering screech of static. The Falcon's comm system had suddenly activated. After a few seconds of electronic scratching, a voice poured through the speakers.

"Anybody there? Come in, somebody. Anyone copy?"

Zak recognized the voice. "That's Han Solo!" He rushed to the control panel and flipped a switch.

"We read you, Han."

There was a pause. "Is that you, kid? Let me talk to one of the commandos."

"They're all gone!" Tash yelled over her brother's shoulder. "We're the only ones left."

They heard Han swear on the other end of the transmission. Then he said, "Look, you have to get out of there. The Imperials are headed right for you!"

"But why?" Deevee wondered. "I thought they were after Master Skywalker."

"So did we," Han said through the speakers. "We tried to lead them away, but the minute Vader realized you weren't with us, he broke off the attack and headed for the ships. It looks like he's after you!"

Cold panic gripped Zak and Tash. Darth Vader was after them.

"What do you think we should do?" Tash asked hoarsely.

"Your only chance is to fly out of there," Han said.

"All right!" Zak cheered, eagerly scanning the Falcon's control board.

"But don't take the Falcon," Han added. "You'd never be able to fly her. Go over to the cargo ship. I'll contact you there and tell you how to start the engines."

"Blaster bolts," Zak spat. "I could so fly it."

"Copy. Falcon out," Tash replied.

She led her brother, Deevee, and Eppon out of the Falcon and over to the other ship. Remembering how Meex had disappeared inside the ship and never come out again, they entered cautiously. But they saw nothing. The ship was empty. They hurried to the cockpit, where Han Solo's voice was already filtering out of the speakers.

"We're here, Han," Tash said.

The speakers crackled. "Great. Here's what you do——"

They never heard his instructions. A blaster bolt flashed over their shoulders and smashed into the control board, sending a shower of sparks into the air.

Tash, Zak, and Deevee whirled around, expecting to see Imperial stormtroopers behind them.

Instead they saw a face from beyond the grave. The face of a Shi'ido.

The face of Borborygmus Gog.

Chapter Thirteen

"You're dead!" Zak blurted out.

Gog grinned an evil grin. His clothes were torn and stained with oil and dirt. His face was covered in scratches and bruises. He was a Shi'ido like Hoole, and the first time she had seen Gog, Tash had mistaken him for her uncle. But any resemblance was now long gone.

"You're dead!" Zak repeated numbly. "We saw you fall into a pit."

The evil scientist shook his head. "You should have looked more closely. I did not die." Gog's eyes burned like lasers. "But if I had died, I would have come back from the grave just to get my revenge on you two interfering brats!"

Angrily, Gog let loose another blaster bolt. This one sizzled past Zak's cheek, destroying the ship's viewscreen behind him. The two Arrandas, Deevee, and Eppon cringed as a shower of sparks rose into the air.

"This has got to be some kind of nightmare," Tash moaned.

Deevee said, "I would agree with you, if I were capable of nightmares, Tash. How could Gog have followed us here?"

That seemed to make the Shi'ido even angrier. "Followed *you* here? Followed *you* here?" he said in a shrill voice. "It is you who followed *me* here. You and your pathetic uncle have dogged my

steps from experiment to experiment, ruining every stage of Project Starscream. And when I come back to my own home, to save the last of my precious plans, what do I find? You have taken that, too! It took me twenty years of work to develop my ultimate weapon, and you have stolen it!"

Tash raised her eyebrows. Gog was ranting like a madman. "When we got to your lab, it was deserted;" she said. "We didn't take anything."

Gog's face went blank for a moment. Then he started to chuckle. The chuckle turned into a roaring laugh as his eyes burned into them. "Ha! You mean you don't know? You haven't realized yet? Then you are greater fools than I ever dreamed!" He jabbed one long, bony finger at them. "You had the ultimate weapon in your hands and never knew it!"

Zak and Tash realized that he wasn't pointing at them. He was pointing at Eppon.

"Come here!" Gog ordered.

Eppon took a step forward, then hesitated. He smiled at Zak and Tash, and started toward them.

"No!" Gog snapped. "I said *here*! Obey!"

At Gog's second command Eppon hurried obediently to the scientist's side. He crouched down at Gog's feet, and the Shi'ido put one hand on the boy's head as if he were a tame pet.

Zak and Tash were stunned. "What have you done to him?"

Gog laughed again. "Done to him? Done to him? I *made* him. He is my creation. He is the result of all my years of work. He is my ultimate weapon!"

"Eppon!" the boy repeated.

Eppon.

Weapon.

Zak and Tash exchanged a horrified glance. They realized that the little boy had only been repeating the one word Gog had used to describe him.

"You nearly ruined everything," Gog growled to Zak, Tash, and Deevee. "You let my living planet loose, you toppled my

experiments with the undead. You destroyed my virus experiments and my Nightmare Machine. At Nespis 8 you used that accursed Force, the one power I cannot control, to defeat me. But I still have my ultimate weapon."

"What is he?" Tash asked, horrified.

"He and others like him will help me conquer the galaxy. He is the first soldier in my Army of Terror."

Tash looked worriedly at Eppon. "Why does he grow so quickly?"

Gog leered as he leveled his blaster. "You'll never know."

Zak and Tash looked around desperately, but there was nowhere to hide, no way to escape. They tensed, waiting for the shots that would end their lives. A second later, the sound of a blaster shot ripped through the air.

But it came from outside the ship.

It was followed by another, and another. Soon a storm of blaster bolts was pounding the cargo ship, making it shake on its landing gear.

"Look!" Deevee pointed out the transparisteel viewport.

Dozens of Imperial stormtroopers were closing in on the ship. Amid the crowds of white armor, the tall, dark figure of Darth Vader stood out.

"No!" Gog yelled. "No, no, no!"

The Shi'ido dashed toward the exit hatch with Eppon close behind him. Zak, Tash, and Deevee looked at each other blankly.

"He's as frightened of Vader as we are," Zak guessed. "That makes no sense," Deevee observed. "They are all Imperials."

"I guess that doesn't necessarily make them friends," Tash said.

They crept toward the exit hatch and found it open. Peeking around the edge, they looked outside.

Gog was standing beside the ship, with Eppon squatting beside him. Darth Vader stood a few meters away, a squad of stormtroopers at his back.

Vader's deep, rasping voice boomed across the distance between them. "Give me the boy."

"He's mine!" Gog protested. "The Emperor put *me* in charge of Project Starscream! He is my weapon."

Zak whispered, "It looks like Han was only part right. Vader wasn't after the Rebels, but he wasn't really after us, either. He wants Eppon!"

"Poor Eppon," Tash said. "He's just a tool they're fighting over."

Vader took a menacing step toward the Shi'ido. "He belongs to the Emperor. Give him to me."

"Never!"

Vader raised a gloved fist. Gog started to choke, clawing helplessly at his throat. The Dark Lord intoned, "You are fortunate that the Emperor wants you alive, Gog. Otherwise, I would make you feel the true power of the Force."

Vader dropped his hand, and Gog collapsed, gulping air.

"Take them both," Vader ordered.

The stormtroopers rushed forward.

"Looks like Gog finally met his match," Zak whispered. "At least he'll never bother us again," Deevee sighed. Tash's eyes went wide. "Don't be so sure!"

Still holding his half-crushed throat, Gog had managed to get to his knees. He pointed at Eppon and, in a rasping voice, wheezed, "Defend me! Defend me!"

Instantly, Eppon sprang at the advancing troopers. For a split second, the two humans and the droid wondered what one unarmed teenage-sized boy could do against the Emperor's toughest soldiers. In the next second, their question was answered.

Eppon jumped on the nearest trooper and ripped his helmet off, exposing the soldier's startled face. The moment Eppon's hands touched the trooper's skin, the soldier screamed. What happened next was so unbelievable, so horrifying, that even the battle-hardened stormtroopers cried out in terror.

The stormtrooper's face turned to jelly. Then, with a loud, wet slurping sound, Eppon sucked the liquefied skin into himself. He simply absorbed the trooper's face into his own body.

The rest of the stormtrooper quickly followed. Skin, bone, organs, everything, simply turned to liquid and was absorbed into Eppon.

Tash and Zak both gagged.

The trooper's empty armor clattered to the ground as the other Imperials stared in disbelief. Eppon took advantage of their shock and attacked another trooper.

"I can't look." Tash shuddered.

"You have to," Zak whispered. "Eppon's growing!"

It was true. Absorbing the troopers made Eppon stronger. Before their eyes, he had another growth spurt, becoming taller and older. But that wasn't all. This final growth must have triggered some other mutation in his body.

As Eppon grew, the purple blotch on his forehead spread quickly down his face and neck, covering his entire body in thick purplish scales. His head grew huge, his hair fell out, and on his skull, thick veins popped out. His arms, which had seemed human enough before, now grew long and crooked, with thick muscles that tore through the seams in his borrowed jumpsuit. The skin on his fingers cracked and thickened until his hands became claws. His eyes filled with a hungry red fire.

All the stormtroopers had frozen in momentary horror. Only Vader was unafraid. He raised his lightsaber and there was a sharp hum as he activated the blade.

As their leader strode forward, the stormtroopers went into action, too. A dozen blasters fired at once, and all of them struck Eppon.

The energy beams didn't slow him down, though. Eppon picked up another trooper as though he weighed nothing, and hurled the armored soldier at the rest of the troop. The stormtroopers stumbled backward in a clatter of armor, crashing into Vader. The weight of a dozen men was not enough to move

the Dark Lord, but the confusion caused by the troopers gave Gog an opening.

"Take me to safety!" he ordered his creation.

Eppon obeyed with blinding speed. He picked Gog up in one arm and raced away, moving so quickly that, by the time Vader had shrugged the troopers off, his two opponents were nowhere in sight.

Vader growled through his breath mask. "You've just signed your death warrant, Gog."

Still hiding just inside the cargo ship, Tash, Zak, and Deevee remained utterly still.

"Maybe," Tash whispered as softly as she could, "he doesn't know we're here. Maybe he'll go after Gog and forget about us."

It seemed as though her wish would be granted. Outside the ship, Vader issued orders to his dazed stormtroopers. "Send a squad to search the surrounding area. If Gog and his creature are nearby, I want them alive. Then bring me a report on the location of those Rebels. I want to make sure they do not escape either."

Yes, Zak and Tash thought at the same time. *We're going to make it!*

"But first," the Dark Lord said, turning and staring directly at the cargo ship, "bring the two children and the droid to me. I plan to question them. Personally."

Chapter Fourteen

Darth Vader ignited his lightsaber and held it close to Zak's throat. The energy sword hummed threateningly. "Do you know what this can do to human flesh?"

Zak nodded.

Vader turned to Tash. "Do you understand that I have another, more terrible weapon at my disposal?"

Tash knew that he meant the dark side of the Force, and she nodded, too.

Tash and Zak were sitting on the floor in the cockpit of the cargo ship.

The stormtroopers had dragged them out, searched them for weapons, then thrown them back into the ship for questioning. They'd been locked into the cockpit, where they had waited for almost half an hour while the troopers plugged into Deevee's computer brain and scanned his memory banks. No one had spoken to them. Finally, the door to the cockpit had opened, and Darth Vader had entered.

"Excellent," Vader said. "Then you will cooperate completely."

Zak and Tash both nodded.

Vader's mere presence was enough to weaken even the bravest heart. He was ruthless, and when he focused his terrible

mind on them, Tash felt dark ripples of the Force wash over her, threatening to drown her in pure evil. Beside her, Zak felt Vader's cruel will like a shadow darker than anything the wraiths could create.

They told him everything.

They told him about Hoole and his secret past, Vader seemed to know about this already, and did not care much about the Shi'ido. They told him about the Rebels, Luke Skywalker and Han Solo and Princess Leia. Vader was more interested in them, but he already seemed to know more than they did, and he quickly changed the subject.

They told him everything they knew about Gog, but again, the Dark Lord already seemed far ahead of them, and dismissed their words.

They told him how they had first arrived on the planet D'vouran, and discovered the first part of Gog's experiment. Vader seemed eager to hear this, and ordered them to continue. He listened as their story wound its way through all the planets they had visited, all the discoveries they had made about Gog and Project Starscream. Vader was intrigued by the details of each experiment.

Tash and Zak guessed that Gog had kept the details hidden, hoping to keep the experiments for himself. Vader now absorbed every bit of information they could give him about the various sections of Project Starscream. Fearing for their lives, Zak and Tash cooperated.

Except for one thing. Instinctively, neither Zak nor Tash mentioned Tash's growing sensitivity to the Force. They did not mention her frequent intuitions of approaching danger, and they certainly did not mention what had occurred on the abandoned space station known as Nespis 8, where Tash had finally become fully aware of her ability to use the Force.

Tash didn't know what made her leave out those details. Maybe it was the Force itself. But she knew that Vader, once he

suspected her awareness of the Force, would never let her out of his sight.

She was sure that Vader would discover her secret anyway. After all, he had been a Jedi Knight before turning to the dark side of the Force. He could sense other Jedi.

But either Tash's Force-sensitivity was very young and weak, or Vader's mind was distracted by other thoughts. He never guessed at the truth. Having gathered all the information he could, the Dark Lord simply turned and strode from the cockpit, locking the door behind him.

A few minutes later Deevee joined them, stumbling into the room as he dragged one useless leg behind him. He was still active, but his chestplate had been pried open and some of his wiring had been damaged.

"Inhospitable brutes!" the droid moaned. "I tried to help them so that they would do as little damage as possible, but they deactivated me! When I was turned back on, they had done this! My left arm is malfunctioning, and my leg servos barely function."

Zak checked the damage. "These wires are blown." He looked around the cockpit. The stormtroopers had locked them in there because, thanks to Gog's blaster fire, the cockpit was useless. The ship was too damaged to fly. The console had been blasted, and loose wires and melted computer terminals were all that remained of the control panels.

"Maybe I can use some of this scrap to repair you," Zak offered. Using his bare hands, he tore a few lengths of wire from the shredded control consoles and began working on Deevee's circuits.

Meanwhile, Tash sat huddled in a corner, her head in her hands. The other two left her alone for several minutes before Deevee finally asked, "Tash, are you all right? Did those Imperials hurt you in any way?"

Tash looked up. "No, I'm okay, Deevee. To tell you the truth, I was thinking of Uncle Hoole."

"Me too," Zak put in. "I just... I'm confused. I don't know how to feel. I mean, we owe him a lot, and I know it was an accident, but I can't stop thinking about the fact that he destroyed this whole planet. Millions of people wiped out, just like that!"

"Just like Alderaan," Tash whispered. "Accident or not, it was a terrible thing to do."

"Well," Deevee said indignantly, "if there's one thing you two should have learned by now, it's that one should never jump to conclusions."

"I don't understand," Tash replied.

The droid gave an electronic version of a sniff. "Of course you don't. That's because you only know half the story. I learned the other half from Artoo-Detoo's files. I tried to tell you earlier, but we were interrupted."

"Tell us now," Zak said.

"Yeah," Tash agreed, looking around the room that had become their prison. "It doesn't look like we're going anywhere soon."

As Zak continued his repairs, Deevee told them what he knew. "It's true that Master Hoole is Mammon. And everyone knows that Mammon is the scientist who did experiments on Kiva. Everyone also knows that those experiments destroyed the entire planet. But what no one knows is that Master Hoole had no idea of the danger. He thought the experiments were totally safe. It was his partner who was in charge of making sure the experiments stayed within safe limits."

"His partner," Tash repeated.

"Gog," Zak said.

"Exactly. When Artoo plugged into the laboratory's computer systems, he discovered more files. He relayed the information to me before we were separated. Apparently, Gog knew that the experiments would destroy the people of Kiva, but he convinced Hoole that they were perfectly safe."

Zak stopped working on Deevee for a moment. "How come no one else knows this? All I've ever heard is that Mammon was in charge of the experiments."

Deevee shrugged. "If I were to venture a guess, I would say that the Empire hid the truth. They needed someone to blame for the disaster, and they placed the blame on Master Hoole. Gog's name was wiped out of all the records except his own personal files. Those are the ones we found in the fortress."

Tash looked suspicious. "But why did they pick on Uncle Hoole? Why didn't they blame both scientists?"

Deevee was eager to explain. "Now we come to the part that will interest you the most. After the disaster at Kiva, Master Hoole became disgusted with himself and with the Empire. He decided to work for them no longer. Gog, apparently, continued to work for the Emperor, so the Imperials protected him, while at the same time purposely destroying Master Hoole's reputation."

Zak started working on Deevee's wires again. "Why didn't Uncle Hoole tell us this?"

Deevee explained. "I suspect that Master Hoole still blames himself for what happened to the Kivans. He is too proud to lay the blame elsewhere. He still accepts responsibility for what happened, even though Gog is really to blame."

Tash wavered. Long ago she had been suspicious of Hoole. Then she'd become convinced that he was on the side of good. Now, her faith in him had been shattered. She wasn't certain what to believe. "Are you *sure* Hoole quit the Empire? What happened to him after that?"

Deevee didn't know. "There is no record. It seems he simply wandered the galaxy. He dropped his first name, for by that time the Empire had spread the word that a Shi'ido named Mammon had wiped out an entire species."

"Four years," Tash muttered. "When Zak and I broke into Uncle Hoole's personal records we found a period of four years that were totally blank."

"Exactly," the droid confirmed. "But I think Master Hoole realized he could not wallow in guilt forever. He decided to put his energies to good use. Knowing he could never change what had happened, he swore that never again would a civilization be lost. He became an anthropologist, traveling from star system to star system, gathering information about hundreds of cultures."

Zak guessed the rest. "But he must have learned something about Gog, maybe that Gog was using the same technology they had developed to start new experiments. He tried to put a stop to it." He looked at his sister. "That's how all this got started."

Tash felt tears well up in her eyes. "He was trying to make up for what he had done," she concluded. "He's been trying to make sure that no one ever misuses science again."

Deevee nodded. "I would say that, rather than being a figure of evil, Master Hoole has acted quite bravely these last few months."

"He's been acting like a hero," Zak agreed. "And we treated him like he was a criminal."

"It won't matter," Tash said. "The wraiths are going to execute him. He may be dead already."

Chapter Fifteen

Deevee rocked back and forth in frustration. "If only we could get out of here and find him!"

"Would it matter?" Zak wondered. "When we left him, it seemed like he was ready to face whatever punishment the Kivans gave out. Even death."

Deevee shook his head. "I know Master Hoole quite well, Zak. I'm sure that we can convince him his life is worthwhile. All we have to do is show him we believe in him."

"All right, then," Zak decided. "Let's go find him."

"And how exactly should we do that?" Tash scoffed. "Just ask the stormtroopers if we can go out for some fresh air? The door is locked, there are stormtroopers on guard outside, and then, of course, there's the little matter of trying to walk out of an Imperial camp."

Zak grinned at her. "The door is no problem. I can hot-wire it by borrowing a little power from Deevee's internal power source... and this!" Zak held up two wires he had been connecting to Deevee's circuits. He touched the wires together, igniting a shower of sparks.

"Oh, goodness!" Deevee said as the electrical feedback gave his systems a jolt.

"As for getting out of camp," Zak continued, "we won't walk. We'll fly the *Millennium Falcon* !"

"Your brain's in hyperspace," Tash retorted.

"You always wanted to be a pilot, didn't you? And I've always wanted to get another look at the Falcon's engines. Together, I'm sure we can figure out how that ship works."

"Okay. That's two out of three," Tash challenged. "But what about the stormtroopers?"

A gleam filled Zak's eye. "That's where you come in." He explained the rest of his plan.

A few minutes later, Tash stood at a tiny round viewport in the middle of the locked door. Through the transparisteel, she could just see the two stormtroopers who guarded the cargo ship.

"I don't think I can do this," she whispered.

"Sure you can," her brother encouraged. "Just have a little confidence."

Tash shook her head. She didn't need confidence. She needed an instruction manual.

Zak's plan called for Tash to use the Force to trick the two stormtroopers. Tash had only recently learned that she had Force-powers. She still had no idea what those powers were, or *how* to use them.

"Here goes nothing," she muttered.

Tash took a deep breath and tried to relax. She had read a lot about the Jedi, and all the books she'd read had said that the Force flowed around all things. It wasn't a matter of *making* the Force do something. It was a matter of *letting* the Force do something. The Force was everywhere. All she had to do was give it a channel.

Focusing her mind, Tash looked at the two troopers and sent a single thought shooting into their brains.

Nothing happened.

She took another deep breath and kept focusing. Although no one had spoken, one of the stormtroopers looked at the other. "What did you say?"

The second stormtrooper grunted, "I didn't say anything."

Tash continued to concentrate.

"I thought you said something about me," the first soldier growled.

The second soldier looked at his partner. "Are you calling me a liar?"

"I'm telling you not to talk about me!"

Tash turned away from the viewport. "Now, Zak."

Beside her, Zak held the two wires that were connected to Deevee's chestplate. Touching them together, he jabbed the wires into the small panel that controlled the door.

Sparks flew, electricity crackled, and the panel short-circuited. The door slid open.

Outside, the two stormtroopers were shoving one another. One of them struck the other on the side of the head, sending his partner crashing to the ground.

"Run!" Zak said.

The three prisoners dashed out of the cargo ship, past the fighting stormtroopers, and across the stony ground. By the time any of the other troopers in the Imperial camp saw what was happening, Zak, Tash, and Deevee had reached the ramp leading into the *Millennium Falcon* . As they entered the ship, Zak slapped the control panel, raising the hatch and locking them inside.

"Come on!" Tash yelled. "It's not going to take them long to get in here."

They scrambled into the Falcon's cockpit. The ship's controls were a jumble of old and new equipment welded together. It looked like a disorganized mess, but somehow, they knew, Han Solo had turned that mess into the fastest ship in the galaxy.

"Where are the shields?" Tash demanded.

"Here!" Zak said, throwing a switch.

One of the landing legs retracted. Thrown off balance, the Falcon groaned and tilted over to one side.

"Sorry," Zak groaned. "Try this one!"

He threw another switch, and the deflector shield indicators went on to full power, just as the advancing stormtroopers brought their weapons to bear.

Tash ran her hands over the controls. They were like nothing she'd ever seen before. "Where would the repulsor switches be?"

"I recommend that you hurry," Deevee urged. "I believe that dark figure approaching the ship is Darth Vader."

Tash felt herself start to panic. "Think, Tash, think. Han Solo flies this ship. He's kind of arrogant, but he's an expert pilot. Think like him." Tash closed her eyes. She'd already called on the Force once today. She might as well try again. Calming her thoughts, she put herself in Han's place. A daring pilot, probably running from the Empire all the time. He'd keep the engine controls within easy reach.

With her eyes still closed, she reached out with her right hand. Her fingers found one switch among twenty, and she flipped it.

The repulsor engines whined to life, and the *Millennium Falcon* leaped off the ground.

"Excellent work, Tash!" Deevee cheered. "Now if we can only locate the forward thrusters."

"Right here," Zak said. "I watched Han do this the last time we were aboard."

Zak grabbed a control stick and jammed it forward. There was a loud roar and a surge of power, and the Falcon rocketed into the sky.

"We did it!" Tash laughed as the ship sped quickly across the surface of the planet. "Now we need to find Uncle Hoole. Does either of you know how to work the scanners?"

"No need," her brother said. He pointed out the viewport. Ahead of them, and below, lay a shallow valley filled with shadows. "That has to be where the wraiths had us."

Zak and Tash worked together to steer the Falcon down toward the valley. The ship made a loud thud and bounced twice on its landing legs before coming to a stop.

Even before the Falcon had completed its landing, Zak said, "I'll be right back," and ran back toward the ship's engines.

"Not the best landing in the galaxy," Tash grunted, "but it'll do."

Deevee said, "I estimate that it will take the Imperials slightly over ten minutes to get here on foot. We don't have much time."

"Let's just hope Uncle Hoole's still alive," Tash replied. She and Deevee ran back toward the hatchway. "Come on, Zak!" Tash yelled.

Zak was standing at the ship's engineering station, tinkering with some equipment. "I'm almost finished!" he yelled.

"There's no time for messing around!" she fumed. "Go ahead. I'll be right behind you!" he called back. Tash had no time to argue. She and Deevee charged forward and plunged into the shadows.

It was like stepping from day into night. They could barely see, and the farther they walked into the shadowy place, the less light they found to see by.

"I may be able to help," Deevee whispered. Something clicked inside his metallic head, and his photoreceptors lit up, casting a pale light into the darkness. It didn't penetrate very far, but it was better than being totally blind.

Tash could feel the wraiths moving all around her, but none of them attacked. Tash had the impression that their attention was focused elsewhere——toward the center of their dark circle. She and Deevee waded forward, the dim light from Deevee's eyes sweeping back and forth.

"Uncle Hoole!" Tash called out.

"Master Hoole!" Deevee echoed.

There was no answer but the angry whispers of the wraiths.

Tash squinted into the swirling shadows. "I think I see something, Deevee——look over there."

The droid turned his glowing eyes in the direction Tash had pointed. His eyebeams fell on a large flat rock. On the rock, Hoole had been stretched out to his full length. Behind him, one of the wraiths had become solid, and its dark body stood over Hoole.

As Tash and Deevee watched, the wraith lifted a huge rock over its head, and prepared to bring it crashing down on Hoole's skull.

Chapter Sixteen

"Stop!"

The voice came out of Tash, but even Tash didn't recognize it. It was commanding and very forceful.

The wraith hesitated. Whispers whipped around the dark circle.

The child has returned.

Why?

Why interrupt the execution?

The execution!

Kill the murderer!

"No," Tash countered. "You can't kill him!"

To her surprise, Hoole lifted his head from the rock. He said quietly, "Tash, do not interfere. I have lived with this guilt for years."

"But it wasn't your fault, Uncle Hoole!" she argued. "I know you blame yourself, but it was Gog's fault. Deevee found the records. Gog knew that the experiment would go wrong, but he didn't tell you!"

Hook sighed heavily. "I should have known, Tash. I should have realized the experiment was a disaster. I am also to blame."

"Maybe a little," she admitted. "Maybe it was wrong to experiment with life on someone else's planet. But you didn't

know things would go wrong!" She turned to the wraiths. "Did you hear me? It wasn't his fault!"

Liarliarliarliarliarliarliar.

"We are not lying!" Deevee replied. "I can show you all the evidence you need. It's back at the laboratory."

"Besides," Tash continued, "Uncle Hoole has spent years paying for his mistakes, and he's risked his life to make sure it never happens again."

But it happened once! It happened here! Because of him. Mammon must die!

"We can show you the real killer!" Tash pleaded. "He is still alive. Gog is still alive!"

*Nonononononono!*came the whispers. Mammon! Mammon must die! We will have our vengeance!

With a violent hiss, the solid wraith brought the stone crashing down.

But Hoole wasn't there.

The instant before the stone struck, Hoole had shapeshifted into a tiny rock rat and skittered out of the way. He hurried toward Tash, shapeshifting as he ran. By the time he reached her, he was a Shi'ido again, and his stern gray face glowered at Tash.

"Did you say Gog was still alive?" he growled.

"Yes, and he's got Eppon. You were right, Uncle Hoole, Eppon is Project Starscream. He's some kind of monster!"

Hoole frowned. "There is little time. We must hurry."

He took Tash by the arm and started forward, but he'd gone only a few steps when something hard and invisible flew out of the darkness, hitting him on the chest. Hoole landed heavily on his back.

*Noescapenoescapenoescapenoescape!*the voices cried. You will not escape our vengeance!

Hoole tried to stand up, but a dark claw slashed out of the shadows, drawing a ribbon of blood along his arm.

Tash could feel the wraith's hatred pulsing around them. She knew that even Hoole could not fight shadows. They were going to die.

The wraiths pressed in for the kill.

In the next moment, they were scattered by a blinding flash of light.

Wraiths screamed and fled among the rocks, letting gray light flood into the valley, as though a great black cloud had moved away from the sun. Except that this sun was Zak, who stood nearby with a grin on his face and a small device in his hand.

He held it up. "One of the Rebels must have left this in the *Millennium Falcon* . It's a thermal detonator," he explained. "Except that I took out the explosives and replaced them with a small ion charge."

"Excellent," Deevee said admiringly. "That worked just as the ion cannon did earlier."

Tash was surprised. "I knew you were good with gadgets, Zak, but how——"

"Hey," Zak bragged, "you're not the only one who reads books. It's just that I prefer tech manuals."

Hoole got to his feet. "We will discuss your choice of reading material later, Zak. For now, we must leave before the wraiths reassemble. Take me to the laboratory."

They hurried into the Falcon. For the first time, Zak and Tash sat at the controls, while Uncle Hoole stood behind them. Zak glanced at his sister, who returned his wry smile. So many times, they had stood behind while Hoole led the way. This time, they were in charge.

Their second landing was only slightly better than the first. Hoole leaped out of the hatchway before it had opened completely, with Tash and Zak close behind him.

"The place still looks deserted," Tash whispered.

"Let's hope so," Hoole replied.

They reached the front door of the fortress. All was dark and silent inside. Creeping as quietly as possible, they made their way down the hallway, until they reached the central chamber.

The room looked undisturbed. The doors to the room stood open, since they had been damaged by the Rebels earlier. The enormous command chair still faced the bank of video monitors, its back toward them. Beyond, the door to the egg chamber was still open.

"Okay, we're here," Zak said softly. "Now what?"

"Now," Hoole replied, "we look for any information that might help us destroy Gog's monster."

"Let me save you some trouble."

The voice was high-pitched and shrill——a weird combination of evil pleasure and utter hatred.

The command chair in the center of the room swiveled around, and they saw Gog grinning at them. He looked confident and secure. Even though his laboratory had been abandoned and damaged by Rebels, it was still the center of his power.

"Let me save you some trouble," Gog repeated. "There is no way to destroy my creature."

Hoole's face was stern and threatening. "Then surrender him to me, Gog. I won't let you use this creation to hurt anyone else. Give him to me."

Gog smiled again. "Why, of course, Hoole. He's right behind you."

Chapter Seventeen

They spun around to see Eppon looming over them. Even Hoole let out a cry of alarm.

Eppon no longer looked even vaguely human. He was over two meters tall, and covered in purplish scales. The remnants of the jumpsuit he'd worn hung in tatters around his waist. His thick arms reached almost to the floor. His eyes were blood red, and his mouth had become a slavering, tooth-filled maw.

"Eppon——" Tash started to say.

Eppon roared and lunged forward.

They backed away as Hoole put himself between Eppon and the others.

"Don't let him touch your skin, Uncle Hoole!" Zak warned.

Hoole shimmered for a moment, and suddenly a huge Wookiee stood in his place. The Wookiee snarled. Eppon roared in reply and lunged forward, and the two huge figures crashed together.

Tash and Zak cringed, waiting for Hoole to turn to jelly... but nothing happened. Eppon clung to the Wookiee, trying to touch exposed skin, but he could not dig past the thick layer of fur that covered the Wookiee's body.

"The creature can't absorb him!" Deevee realized.

Eppon was as surprised as Zak and Tash. That gave Hoole the upper hand. Powerful blows from his Wookiee claws rained down on Eppon, beating the monster back. Tash and Zak thought Hoole would actually win, until Eppon changed his tactics. With brute force, he started to trade blows with the Wookiee.

A powerful blow of Eppon's arm crashed down on the Wookiee's head, stunning Hoole. Losing his concentration, Hoole shimmered and shifted back into his own shape. Quickly, Eppon grabbed hold of Hoole's arms. Then Eppon's flesh began to ooze and slither. Strings of slime grew out of his skin and started to crawl up Hoole's arms toward his open mouth and his eyes.

"Ooze," Tash said with a shudder. "Just like the virus creatures we saw on Gobindi."

Struggling to escape, Hoole fell on his back with Eppon crashing down on top. As the strings of slime touched Hoole's bare skin, the Shi'ido cried out in pain and fear.

Just then, a black shadow fell across the two combatants. An incredible force lifted Eppon up and hurled him against a nearby wall. Eppon struck the wall with such force that the entire building shook, and the ceiling above them cracked.

Darth Vader had come.

Vader glanced down at Hoole. "You are fortunate that I have not yet questioned you."

Sitting in his command chair, Gog shrieked like a madman at Eppon. "Kill Vader! Kill Vader!"

Eppon leaped to his feet and threw himself at Vader. He slammed into the Dark Lord with the sound of a mountain falling. Vader took half a step back to keep his balance, then lifted Eppon up over his head. Eppon tried to clasp his opponent, but Vader's armor covered every inch of his skin. With the help of the dark side of the Force, Vader sent Eppon crashing into the egg chamber, ten meters away.

Schrrrummmmm!

Vader ignited his lightsaber.

Zak and Tash stared, entranced by the battle, until Hoole and Deevee touched their shoulders. "Run," Hoole said quietly.

They turned toward the exit, but before they could take even one step, the doors crashed closed.

"What!" Zak cried in surprise, pounding on the heavy metal. "I thought the doors were broken!"

They turned back around to see that Vader had momentarily focused his attention on them. He had used the Force to shut them in. "You will not escape me this time. When I have finished with this creature, I will deal with you."

They watched Vader stride toward Eppon, who was just climbing out of the wreckage of the egg chamber. Eppon tried to grab Vader, but the Dark Lord slashed with his lightsaber, cutting off Eppon's right arm just above the elbow. Eppon howled in pain and backed away a step. Even as he did, his right arm quivered and shifted, and a new arm quickly grew to replace the one he'd lost.

"What shall we do?" Deevee moaned. "Whoever wins this fight will turn on us next."

Zak was still pounding on the door in frustration.

To his surprise, someone on the outside pounded back. "Let us in!"

It was Han Solo.

"Vader sealed the door. We can't get out!" Zak called back.

Han's voice leaked through the heavy door. "Get back! We're going to blow it open!"

Zak and the others hurried away from the door and crouched down.

Meanwhile, Eppon had grabbed Vader again. This time the Dark Lord did not hold back. He called on the dark side of the Force and used it to lift Eppon five meters into the air. With a strangled cry, Eppon hurtled like a missile straight at the command chair where Gog sat, knocking him over with a loud crash.

Then, *BOOM!* The door was blown inward and flame and smoke poured into the room as the Rebels set off several explosive devices.

The heavy door flew across the room and crashed against the wall near Darth Vader.

The echoes of the explosion died, but a deep rumbling continued. "The walls!" Hoole warned. "Watch out!"

The walls had been weakened by Vader's battle with Eppon. The Rebels' explosion had weakened them further. A large section collapsed inward, and part of the ceiling came crashing down as Zak, Tash, and the others used their arms to protect their heads from the falling debris.

When the dust had settled, Tash realized that they were doubly lucky. Rubble covered the far end of the room, making an impassable barrier between the egg chamber and the laboratory.

"Vader's sealed in there!" she cried. "He's trapped in the egg chamber!"

Nearby, Gog had climbed to his feet. Beside him, Eppon panted and drooled. "It won't help you," the evil Shi'ido said. He motioned Eppon forward. "You are still doomed!"

"Not if we can help it," Leia said.

The Rebels surged into the room. Han, Luke, Leia, Chewbacca, and the remaining Rebel commandos aimed their blasters and fired, pouring energy beams into Eppon's grotesque body. The creature squealed as he was struck again and again. He spun around, and collapsed on the floor.

"Cover him!" Leia ordered, pointing at Gog. "Check the creature."

Most of the commandos kept their blasters trained on Gog. The evil Shi'ido merely grinned and did not move. He leaned forward, eagerly waiting for what he knew would happen next.

One of the Rebel soldiers crept forward. Eppon's purple body lay unmoving, his lifeless face pointed toward the ceiling and his eyes closed.

The commando jabbed Eppon with the end of his blaster rifle.

No movement.

"All clear," he called out. "The creature is——*uurrk!*"

He could not finish his sentence.

Eppon had reached up and grabbed him by the throat.

Chapter Eighteen

No one could move quickly enough to save the Rebel commando. Eppon grabbed the soldier by his bare hands, and the soldier turned to jelly before their eyes. Seconds later, the commando's body had been sucked into Eppon.

The creature leaped to his feet, looking stronger than ever.

The Rebels fired again. The blaster bolts burned gaping holes in Eppon's body, but hardly made him flinch. They did slow him down, though. Instead of charging, Eppon stalked slowly forward.

"Can't this creature be killed?" Luke wondered.

"No," Tash said as the last pieces of the puzzle suddenly came together for her. Eppon was the end result of Project Starscream. All the terrible experiments they had discovered were elements of the project. Each one reflected some part of Eppon's power.

"Just like the undead on Necropolis, he can't be killed!" Tash explained quickly. "He's like all the creatures we've faced! Like the virus creature on Gobindi, he absorbs his victims. And he grows stronger with every creature he eats, just like D'vouran!"

"Sounds like we're in trouble," Han said, still firing at the approaching creature. "We can't hold him off forever!"

Although the Rebel weapons did not stop Eppon, the blaster shots came so fast and furiously that they prevented the creature

from coming too close. Again, Eppon changed his tactics. His red eyes flashed, and one by one he gazed directly into the eyes of the Rebel fighters.

"I don't want to fall, I don't want to fall!" one commando pleaded, as though he were hanging from a steep cliff.

"I don't understand," Deevee said in confusion. "He seems to be afraid."

"That's it, Deevee," Zak guessed. "Eppon has the same powers as the Nightmare Machine. He's gotten inside their minds. He's attacking them with their worst fears."

Han, Leia, and the others were soon in the same state, cringing in fear and crying out at things no one else could see.

Luke Skywalker was on his hands and knees. He seemed to be fighting hard against something. He whispered over and over again: "Ben! Ben!"

Leia dropped her blaster. "No, the Rebellion can't fail. It can't!"

Han had fallen to his knees. "I'll pay you back, Jabba," he muttered to himself. "I'll pay you back, I swear it!"

Beside him, Chewbacca was growling angrily, trying to fight off some Wookiee fear.

Even Hoole fell under its spell. He rocked back and forth, his arms clutched about his shoulders, whispering apologies for the destruction of Kiva.

Only Deevee, Zak, and Tash were unaffected.

Eppon stalked closer. He would be on them in a few minutes. Zak backed up until he was right next to his sister. "We can't fight what we can't even touch!"

Tash, too, backed away, and bumped into Luke Skywalker. Luke had managed to get to his feet. His eyes were squeezed shut as he tried to fight off the illusion. He muttered to himself, "The Force... got to stay... with the Force. "

"That's it!" she realized. "I can use the Force!"

Zak understood. Through his experiments, Gog had managed to take control of the galaxy's most powerful elements. He had

learned to control life and death. But the one thing he had never been able to do was control the Force.

"I just hope you can use the Force as effectively as Vader did," Deevee said frantically.

As soon as she heard those words, Tash knew that Deevee was wrong. She did not want to use the Force the way Vader had. That was the dark side.

She recalled Luke's words: *The Force isn't a weapon like a blaster or a lightsaber. It's more like a power that helps you focus yourself and understand everything around you.*

If the Force connected all living things, then maybe it connected her to Eppon, too. Maybe she could use it to reach him.

"Eppon," she said softly. As she spoke, she reached out with her feelings, trying to imagine an energy field that flowed from her to the monster and back again. "Eppon, it's me. Tash. The one who took you from that egg chamber. I carried you on my back. We laughed and played together."

Eppon lunged forward to grab her. Tash didn't move. She ignored her pounding heart. She focused on the Force.

"We don't want to hurt you, Eppon. We're your friends. Remember?"

Eppon's clawed hand hung over Tash, but did not come down. He could have destroyed her in a moment, but instead he only growled at her, gnashing his teeth.

Using the Force, Tash connected herself to Eppon's mind. She felt anger, even rage, but somehow she knew that those emotions didn't belong to Eppon. They belonged to the evil scientist who had created him.

She said softly, "What you're doing is not your fault. You were created by evil. But there is good in you. I can feel it."

Eppon lowered his clawed hand.

A few meters away, Gog howled in frustration. "No, no! Destroy her!"

Eppon responded to Gog's command. His red eyes flashed, and Tash felt a wave of cold fear wash over her. Her concentration started to break. She suddenly began to worry that the others would escape while she was fighting Eppon. They would abandon her, leaving her to die while they escaped to safety. They would betray her.

She started to lose her connection to the Force.

Eppon growled, and raised his claws again to strike her down.

You're not alone, Tash. Tash didn't hear the voice with her ears. She heard it inside her head. *You're never alone.*

The sound of the voice made her feel stronger. She concentrated again, and felt the Force flow through her once more.

There was something more. She felt someone else using the Force, too. Someone had added their strength to hers.

Nearby, Luke had regained control of himself. She could feel him concentrating along with her.

Tash aimed all her thoughts at Eppon. She summoned all the images of the baby boy Eppon into her brain, recalling how she had held him, and played with him, and hugged him when the commandos wanted to desert him.

The images penetrated Eppon's angry mind. He lowered his claws again. His flaming eyes studied Tash, then turned to look at Zak. He growled softly.

Gog shrieked, "Kill them now!"

Eppon roared again, but this time he did not attack Zak and Tash. The creature whirled about and started toward Gog, its massive arms reaching out to crush him.

"Get him, Eppon!" Zak cheered.

As Eppon approached, Gog raised a small, flat object and pressed a single button.

Eppon's head exploded.

Chapter Nineteen

The creature's body slumped to the ground. His head had disintegrated in a flash of light.

Gog shook his head. "Did you think I learned nothing from my past failures?"

He stood over Eppon's body and kicked it with his toe.

"Learning from mistakes is the basis of all science," he said. "I knew that once I had created the invincible soldiers for my Army of Terror, I had to be prepared in case I lost control." He patted the small device in his hand. "I planted a tiny explosive device in the creature's brain. It was the only way the creature could be destroyed."

"You killed him!" Tash cried.

"Murderer!" Zak spat.

Gog only shrugged. "I created him. He was mine to destroy."

"But you've still lost, Gog," Hoole said. "You'll never get off this planet."

"Oh? Who will stop me, Hoole?" Gog laughed.

"We will," Han said weakly. Beside him, Chewbacca snarled. The Rebels were recovering from Eppon's fear power.

"You? You have more important things to worry about."

Even as Gog spoke, Hoole and the others felt a shadow fall across them. No, not one shadow——thousands of shadows.

The wraiths were rushing into the laboratory.

They filled the room with swirling darkness, whispering and moaning, *Murder! Death to Mammon! Death!*

Zak and Tash felt the wraiths smother them, holding them down, while more of the shadow creatures pinned Hoole in place. He struggled, but could not move. The wraiths surrounded the Rebels.

It didn't matter, Zak realized. They had no ion weapons. They had nothing with which to fight the wraiths.

They all seemed too exhausted to fight. They waited for the shadow creatures to take their revenge.

Except for Deevee. The droid struggled against the shadows that imprisoned him. Calling on every spark of energy that his mechanical body could muster, he pushed his way toward the center of the room.

"Deevee, what are you doing?" Zak asked.

Deevee couldn't spare the energy to answer.

*Mammon must die! Mammon must die!*the voices moaned.

A black claw slashed through the darkness, ripping a long red line across Hoole's chest. Gog cackled gleefully.

Deevee reached the control console in the center of the room.

Another black claw cut Hoole, drawing blood on his cheek. Gog cheered.

Tash and Zak watched Deevee punch commands into the computer console. In response to his instructions, the console lit up, sending power to the five video monitors that hung overhead.

Gog's image appeared on all five screens.

It was an old recording, blurred by years of electronic storage. But it clearly showed Gog transmitting a message to the Emperor himself.

"Your Excellency," Gog said in the message. "I have completed the final arrangements for the experiments here on Kiva. As we suspected, our experiment is a failure. It will not create life. It will destroy life. However, I plan to let the test go

forward. I suspect that the results should be quite devastating, and may provide you with a useful weapon."

The recording ended.

The room was utterly silent.

Then the whispers started. *Gog.*

Another voice joined the first.

Gog.

More voices joined in. The wraiths seemed to be debating among themselves. For a moment, the voices of the shadow creatures were filled with doubt. They had been cursing the name of one scientist for twenty years. It was almost impossible for them to change course now. But Deevee had set the tape on replay, and Gog's recorded voice echoed throughout the chamber: "I plan to let the test go forward."

Suddenly, a thousand voices accused: *Goggggggggggggggg!*

Gog backed away, pointing at Hoole. "No, no. *He* is responsible. He did it!"

*You are a murderer! You are a killer! Gog, you must die!*The shadows fell away from Zak and Tash. They fell away from Hoole, and the Rebels.

They poured onto Gog.

The wraiths descended on the evil scientist. They smothered him until he could no longer be seen.

Only Gog's voice could be heard, screaming in agony.

The blackness of the shadows seemed to collapse in on itself, growing smaller and smaller, darker and darker, until finally it disappeared into thin air. Then the screaming stopped.

Epilogue

Tash and Zak let a moment of silence pass.

Their nightmares were finally at an end. Gog was gone for good. Project Starscream had finally been destroyed.

Zak was the first to speak. "What do you think happened to the wraiths?" he whispered.

Hoole answered. "They were creatures of energy and hatred. Perhaps, in killing Gog, they burned themselves out."

By now, the Rebels had fully recovered from the fear Eppon had planted in them. Han Solo shook his head. "And I thought things were weird enough hanging around Luke!"

"Are you all right?" Leia asked.

"I think so," Tash answered. "Thanks for your help."

Luke put a hand on her shoulder. "I think we owe you *our* thanks. That creature might have destroyed us all if you hadn't beaten it."

Tash smiled weakly. "I couldn't have done it without you, Luke. Thanks for coming to help us."

"You kidding?" Han replied with a laugh. "I had to get my ship back!"

***

John Whitman

The roar of the *Millennium Falcon*'s engines still filled the air as a lightsaber slashed through the last of the rubble. The powerful sword cut a large hole through the wall of debris, and Darth Vader stepped into the laboratory.

His eyes, hidden by the dark mask, quickly scanned the scene. He saw the empty room. He saw the corpse of the dead creature. He knew that Gog's experiment was over. The Rebels had succeeded in destroying the first soldier in the Emperor's Army of Terror. Without Gog's knowledge, there would be no others.

Vader felt no regret. Even a creature as powerful as Eppon was nothing compared to the power of the Force. Besides, the Army of Terror was supposed to have been unbeatable, and Gog had been able to destroy his own creature. Obviously, the experiment was flawed.

The Dark Lord turned his thoughts to the Rebels. They had escaped him again. He swore by the power of the dark side that he would find them. Dark thoughts filled Vader's mind as he strode away, leaving only the dry, sad wind of Kiva to sweep through the ruined laboratory.

The wind whispered around the room, swirling in the corners, swirling around Eppon's body.

Maybe it was the wind blowing across the dead planet. Maybe not.

But a moment later, one of Eppon's fingers twitched..

End of Volume One
Concluded In Volume Two

About the Author

John Whitman is an American novelist and martial arts instructor. He attended the University of California, Berkeley, from 1985–1989 and received a B.A. in Literature; he attended Boston University from 1990–1991 and received an M.A. in Creative Writing. He has also served as the Executive Editor of Time Warner Audio books.

He has written many books, and written for projects such as *Zorro* (e.g. *Witch's Curse*) and the *Star Wars: Galaxy of Fear* series. His most recent books include four novels based on the television series *24*, published by HarperCollins. He is also the co-author of the books *Complete Krav Maga* and *Krav Maga for Beginners* published by Ulysses Press.

About the Type

Garamond is a group of many serif typefaces, named for sixteenth-century Parisian engraver Claude Garamond, generally spelled as Garamont in his lifetime. Garamond-style typefaces are popular and particularly often used for book printing and body text.

Garamond's types followed the model of an influential typeface cut for Venetian printer Aldus Manutius by his punchcutter Francesco Griffo in 1495, and are in what is now called the old-style of serif letter design, letters with a relatively organic structure resembling handwriting with a pen, but with a slightly more structured, upright design.